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A Problem with Theistic Hope

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Consider the proposition that:

> A: while it is impermissible, epistemically or morally, to believe the propositions of theism as they lack sufficient evidence, it is permissible, epistemically or morally, to hope that those propositions are true and thereby to act as if they are true.

Friends of (A) present it as an attractive alternative to fideism, on the one hand, and agnosticism, on the other, for any subscribing to high Cliffordian standards for belief, who hold that theism lacks sufficient evidence, and yet seek a wholehearted theistic commitment. Among the friends of (A) we find J. S. Mill and, more recently, Louis Pojman, James Muyskens, W. L. Sessions, and, most recently, Aaron Rizzieri.[1]

In what follows I examine a problem facing anyone who endorses (A), and advocates erecting the superstructure of theistic commitment on a base of theistic hope. Concisely put, those who endorse (A) will very likely violate the evidentialist standards which drove them toward (A) in the first place. This problem is in many respects a simple one, but even so, an intractable problem rendering conformity to (A) problematic.

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[1] See John Stuart Mill, "Theism," in *Three Essays on Religion* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1874 (1870)); Louis Pojman, *Religious Belief and the Will* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986), pp. 212–34; James Muyskens, *The Sufficiency of Hope: The Conceptual Foundations of Religion* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1979); W. L. Sessions, *The Concept of Faith: a philosophical investigation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994); and Aaron Rizzieri, *Pragmatic Encroachment, Religious Belief, and Practice* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 48–55, 134–59.

For a brief examination of the "theistic faith as hope" model see Daniel J. McKaughan, "Authentic Faith and Acknowledged Risk: dissolving the problem of faith and reason," *Religious Studies* 49/1 (2013): 101–24.

What is it to endorse (A)? For our purposes we'll understand this as accepting propositions (T1), (T2), and (T3). To understand propositions (T1)–(T3), let's first examine propositions (1), (2), and (3):

> 1: For any rational person S and proposition p, S may believe p only if p is supported by sufficient evidence.

Proposition (1) echoes the standards governing belief associated most famously with W. K. Clifford's fiat that "it is wrong always, everywhere, and for any one, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence."[2] Those who accept (1) we might call evidentialists. Evidentialism holds that the appropriateness of acquiring or holding a belief is entirely a matter of its evidential support. Clifford fashioned evidentialism in a moral sense: it is morally impermissible to believe something lacking the support of sufficient evidence. More recently, the normative force of evidentialism has been understood in an epistemic sense: it is epistemically impermissible to believe something lacking the support of sufficient evidence.[3] The threshold of sufficiency for evidence is minimally set at a preponderance of evidence, though there are evidentialists who set it much higher. Whether understood in a moral or epistemic sense, proposition (1) precludes belief formation on the basis of non-evidentialist reasons (say, moral reasons or pragmatic reasons, for instance).

Proposition (2) holds that:

> 2: for any rational person S and proposition p, while S may hope that p, S may not believe p if p lacks sufficient evidentiary support.

Proposition (2) makes clear that hope faces a barrier lower, or more lenient, than that governing belief. Hope is a positive attitude that a particular uncertain state of affairs obtains. It is positive because one can hope for something only if one prefers that it obtain. Hope is typically directed toward uncertainties in the future, but one can hope about something in the past. Hope is directed toward an uncertainty because one cannot hope for what one knows to be false. Nor can one hope for what one knows will obtain. One can, however, hope for what one thinks is unlikely. If one

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[2] W. K. Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief," in *Lectures and Essays*, ed. Leslie Stephen and Frederick Pollock, vol. II (London: Macmillan and Company, 1879), p. 186.

[3] See, for example, Earl Conee and Richard Feldman, *Evidentialism: essays in epistemology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), pp. 1–2. And Richard Swinburne, *Epistemic Justification* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), p. 135. Modern evidentialists, unlike Clifford, typically allow that one may believe for non-evidential reasons (say, pragmatic reasons), though doing so does not epistemically rationalize belief.

believes that an event is very unlikely, hope seems pointless, still long odds alone are not enough to preclude hope, as one can hope to win the lottery, all the while knowing that it is very unlikely that one will. There are cases in which it would be irrational to hope, but again long odds alone do not entail that hope is irrational.[4] It is here at least that hope and belief diverge, since one can hope for something that it would be irrational to believe.[5] While playing the lottery I can hope to win, but I cannot rationally believe that I will. In sum, (2) asserts that a rational person may hope for that which she cannot believe.[6]

Proposition (3) asserts:

> 3: For any rational person *S* and proposition *p*, if one may hope that *p* then one may act as if *p* is true.

As James Muyskens puts it, "the person who hopes that p acts as if p were true. He arranges his life and his emotions as if he believed that p."[7] Hope, if Muyskens is right, issues in action. Of course, there are cases in which it

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[4] For example, it would be irrational to hope for anything that would be harmful to my best interests.

[5] Adrienne Martin holds that "it is irrational to form or maintain a hope based on the belief that the hoped-for outcome is either more or less probable than one's evidence. Subjective probability estimates should be based on one's evidence, or perhaps the evidence one would take into account if one were fully epistemically responsible." See her *How We Hope: a moral psychology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), p. 141.

Martin's contention that hope cannot neither lag nor outstrip its counterpart evidence may be problematic: Goldbach's Conjecture has been neither proved nor disproved. If true, the conjecture is necessarily true; if false, necessarily false. So, our evidence is that the Conjecture is either probability one or zero. Nevertheless, it is perfectly reasonable for one, knowing all of this, to assign it a subjective probability that falls somewhere between one and zero. And likewise, one may one hope that the Conjecture is true, even knowing that it is either necessarily true or necessarily false. Of course, hope is inappropriate for anything that is impossible, and it is redundant for anything which is necessary. But, given the uncertainty, one may nonetheless hope that it is true (or, conversely, that it is false); and, at least in that way, hope may outstrip or lag its evidence.

[6] Is hope compatible with epistemically justified or warranted belief? Suppose it is not, such that one cannot hope that p if one is epistemically justified in believing that p. The idea would be something like this: It is not just that hoping that p, where one is justified in taking the probability that p to be greater than one half is rationally redundant (assuming that taking the probability of p to be greater than one half is sufficient for epistemic justification), but it is conceptually not possible as hope that p requires significant uncertainty, which is lacking if one takes the probability of p to be greater than one half. In effect, the idea would be that the probability space in which hope resides is greater than zero but less than one half. If something relevantly like this idea is right, and, further, if hope is a virtue indispensable for human flourishing, then this would have interesting consequences for various debates in the philosophy of religion.

[7] Muyskens, *The Sufficiency of Hope*, pp. 17 and 40.

is rational to hope but dangerous or imprudent or irrational to act upon that hope. I may rationally hope to win the lottery, but financial ruin lurks if I should act upon that hope. Perhaps it follows from hoping that p that one may act in a way conducive to bringing p about. But it would be foolish to hold that acting as if p follows from hoping that it is. Proposition (3) then, as it stands, is false. Is the falsity of (3) a problem for the friend of (A)? It is, but not an intractable problem as a natural way of defusing involves employing a pragmatic standard that demarcates hopes one may properly act upon from those one may not. Without doing the hard work required in formulating a substantive and wrinkle-free pragmatic permissibility principle, let's just gesture toward one:

> 3': For any rational person S and proposition p, if one may hope that p, and acting upon p is harmful neither to one's interests nor those of others, then one may act as if p is true.[8]

If we take hope that p to include a preference or desire that p, then the preference that p, along with the belief that acting upon p is not harmful, provides a motivation for a hope-based theistic commitment.

With propositions (1)–(3') in hand, we can understand their theistic counterparts as:

> T1: For any rational person S and theistic proposition p, S may believe p only if p is supported by sufficient evidence. And,
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> T2: For any rational person S and theistic proposition p, while S may hope that p, one may not believe that p if p lacks sufficient evidentiary support. And,
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> T3: For any rational person S and theistic proposition p, if one may hope that p, and given that acting as if p is not harmful, then one may act as if p is true.

With its licensing of acting on hope, (T3) is the load-bearing proposition supporting the weight of the practices and rituals constitutive of a theistic commitment. Lacking (T3), the friends of (A) would have no real hope of grounding a religious commitment independent of a doxastic base. What is it to act as if theism were true? It is to put into practice behaviors characteristic of a particular religious tradition (such as Judaism or Christianity or Islam), including:

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[8] I do not suggest that a pragmatic standard is the only way to demarcate those hopes that may be acted upon from those that may not be, only that it is a natural way of doing so. J. S. Mill, as we will see, employs a pragmatic standard as a way of licensing hope. See also Muyskens, *The Sufficiency of Hope*, pp. 46–7.

I: Reorienting one's values and priorities and life projects so as to reflect a commitment to the particular religious tradition;

II: Engaging in the rituals and practices such as attending worship services and praying associated with the particular tradition;

III: Investing a significant proportion of one's time and money in support of causes associated with the particular tradition.

So, the friend of (A) we will understand as accepting (T1)–(T3) and thereby seeking to implement (I)–(III) as part of acting on the theistic hope.

BEHAVIORS AND BELIEFS

Toward the end of the *Pensées* passage containing the wager argument, an imagined interlocutor confronts Pascal, saying that while she agrees with Pascal's wager argument, she finds herself unable to believe:

I confess it, I admit it, but even so…my hands are tied and I cannot speak a word. I am forced to wager and I am not free, they will not let me go. And I am made in such a way that I cannot believe. So, what do you want me to do?[9]

Pascal responds by prescribing a behavioral regimen intended to inculcate belief by curbing the passions:

…at least realize that your inability to believe, since reason urges you to do so and yet you cannot, arises from your passions. So concentrate not on convincing yourself by increasing the number of proofs of God but on diminishing your passions. You want to find faith and you do not know the way? You want to cure yourself of unbelief and you ask for remedies? Learn from those who have been bound like you, and who now wager all they have. They are people who know the road you want to follow and have been cured of the affliction of which you want to be cured. Follow the way by which they began: by behaving just as if they believed, taking holy water, having masses said, etc. That will make you believe quite naturally, and according to your animal reactions.[10]

Pascal's prescribed regimen involves a sort of belief-inducing technology, a habitual and inclusive role-playing as if one already believed by engaging in the behaviors associated with believers. By doing so, Pascal suggests, one enhances the prospect that one will acquire theistic belief. Habitual role-playing, the idea goes, foreseeably eventuates in acquiring the belief.

[9] Pascal, *Pensées*, translated by Honor Levi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 153–6.
[10] Pascal, *Pensées*, pp. 155–6.

Pascal was prescient with his advice as contemporary social psychology, with its theories of biased scanning, social perception theory, and cognitive dissonance theory, are well supported experimentally and advance, in some version or other, the idea that behavior can alter, influence, and generate attitudes, including beliefs.[11] The Pascalian prescription, for our purposes, might be expressed as:

> B: For any theistic proposition p, if one hopes and acts as if p, then, foreseeably, one will eventually come to believe that p.

How shall we understand (B)? Proposition (B), in effect, sketches a "belief-producing technology" consisting of two components: a propositional component and a non-propositional one. The propositional component involves accepting a proposition, while the non-propositional component is a behavioral regimen of acting on that acceptance. One accepts a proposition, when one assents to its truth when prompted and employs it as a premise in one's deliberations. Accepting a proposition, unlike believing, is an action under our direct control. One can accept a proposition which one does not believe. Indeed, we do this often. Think of the gambler's fallacy. One might be disposed to believe that the next toss of a fair coin must come up tails, since it has been heads on the previous seven tosses. Nevertheless, one should refrain from accepting that the next toss of that fair coin must come up tails, or that the probability that it will is greater than one half. Acceptance, we should remember, unlike believing, is an action under our direct control. The non-propositional component involves acting upon a proposition, or behaving as though it were true even if one does not believe it. This Pascalian two-step regimen of accepting a proposition and acting upon it is a common way of inculcating belief in that proposition.[12]

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[11] See, for instance, James Olson and Jeff Stone, "The Influence of Behavior on Attitudes," in *The Handbook of Attitudes*, eds. D. Albarracin, B. T. Johnson, and M. P. Zanna (London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2005), pp. 223–71; Daryl J. Bem, *Beliefs, Attitudes, and Human Affairs* (Belmont, CA: Brooks/Cole Publishing Co., 1970); Laura Glasman and Dolores Albarracin, "Forming Attitudes that Predict Future Behavior: a meta-analysis of the attitude-behavior relation," *Psychological Bulletin* 132/5 (2006): 778–822; Daryl J. Bem, "Self-Perception Theory," *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 6 (1972): 1–62.

[12] As Simon Blackburn writes, "I think that intuitively we understand that beliefs are contagious. So if someone goes along with the herd and follows one of the major surrounding religions of their culture, this need not demonstrate much of a defect." "Religion and Respect," in *Philosophers without Gods: meditations on atheism and the secular life*, ed. L. M. Antony (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 182.

There are of course objections to the Pascalian regimen of inducing belief. Daniel Garber has objected that no one should accept Pascal's wager as a sound argument for theistic belief, since, having accepted the wager argument and undertaking to induce belief as Pascal recommends, one ends ups in an irrational state, as self-inducing belief is rationally problematic.[13] Garber's objection is based on a distinction between first-order rationality for believing *p* (the belief that *one has good reason to believe p*), and second-order rationality for believing *p* (the belief that *one has good reason to deny that one is deluded at the first order*). Garber argues that a Pascalian can enjoy first-order rationality for theistic belief because of the wager, but would thereby lack second-order rationality because the regime one undertook to inculcate theistic belief may have induced a delusion:

If I follow Pascal's program, I will indeed land in a state in which I believe, and in which I am genuinely convinced that I can give a good reason for what I believe, if challenged. But am I entitled to trust my confidence when I am in that state? After all, I deliberately performed a series of steps that I knew would, if I followed them, put me into exactly that state. Now it is one thing if, in the course of events, I find myself in that epistemic state. But it would seem to be quite another if I am deliberately going about deceiving myself, believing because I want to believe. The process by which I attain the rational belief would seem to undermine the rationality of the final outcome.[14]

Garber's argument however is indictable on at least two counts. First, it is far from clear that the Pascalian regimen of inducing belief requires self-deception, and even if it does that doing so is problematic. Self-deception may be a serious problem with regard to inculcating a belief that one takes to be false, but it does not seem to be a serious threat involving the inculcation of a belief that one thinks has as much evidence in its favor as against it, or whose probability is indeterminate, since one could form the belief knowing full well the evidential situation. What is belief? We can say that believing a certain proposition, *p*, just is *being disposed to feel that p is probably the case*. But, clearly enough, it does not follow that believing that *p* involves *being disposed to feel that p is probably the case based on the evidence at hand*. The latter does not follow from the former since the latter contains more, or is more complex, than the former. If this is right then self-deception does not seem particularly problematic in cases in which one thinks the evidence is balanced or cases where the relevant probability is indeterminate.

[13] *What Happens after Pascal's Wager: living faith and rational belief* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2009).
[14] Garber, "Relgio Philosophi," in *Philosophers without Gods*, p. 39.

Second, Garber's objection is much too broad, as it ensnares any belief indirectly and intentionally acquired, and not just a Pascalian belief. Consider someone with racist beliefs and values. It seems clear enough that criticizing those racist beliefs and values is appropriate, even if direct doxastic voluntarism is false. Further, suppose the person with those beliefs and values realizes that the behaviors flowing out of them are socially disadvantageous (he has not yet grasped the wrongness of his atti-tudes, let's suppose). Seeking to disabuse himself of these socially prob-lematic beliefs and values for prudential and not moral reasons, our inconvenienced racist takes steps to modify his attitudes by acquiring socially acceptable replacements in much the same way that the Pascalian recommends acting so as to inculcate theistic belief. If Garber is correct, our erstwhile racist's newly acquired attitudes, inculcated via indirect and intentional steps, are not rational. That result, however, does not seem right, as one would not be irrational in disabusing himself of morally problematic beliefs and values for prudential reasons. Being entangled, then, in a net cast too wide displays no defect on the part of the ensnared but a defect of the casting.

While questions about (B) remain, it nonetheless has a point: by regu-larly engaging in behaviors and practices characteristic of theists, one engages in actions which foreseeably tend to inculcate theistic belief. Faith is catching, as associating and imitating the faithful is an effective way of generating faithful belief.

THE PROBLEM OF CATCHING BELIEF

Any who accept (T1)–(T3) will find themselves taking steps to foster hope, while holding that they ought to avoid belief, and yet the very steps involved in fostering hope—immersive role-playing as a theist or acting as if theism were true—also tend to generate belief. Behavior influences belief and so habitually acting as if theism were true very often results in one believing that theism is true. Those who habitually or chronically implement (I)–(III) find eventually that those are not just tasks they per-form, but are at the heart of who they are and what they believe. And yet, theistic belief is itself considered off-limits having been judged bereft of adequate evidential support by those endorsing (A). How might a friend of (A) seek to defuse what we might call *the problem of catching belief*? The most likely way is by taking steps to ensure that one does not catch the unjustified belief.

Prior to examining the most promising steps one might take to avoid catching the unjustified belief, we should recall a venerable tradition within Christianity, which contends that a right disposition is necessary to appreciate the evidence in support of Christianity. This tradition holds that there is sufficient evidence in support of the theistic claims assumed by Christianity, but only those rightly disposed can properly access and assess that evidence. Anselm, echoing Augustine, famously wrote that "I do not seek to understand in order to believe but I believe in order to understand. For I believe even this: that I shall not understand unless I believe."[15] Pascal arguably was a proponent of this tradition too, as he held that sufficient evidence is available, but the failure to appreciate it is due to irrational attitudes.[16] The role of the wager, then, would be to move self-interested individuals away from their self-induced blindness, toward a perspective in which they can appreciate the evidence for theism.

With this tradition in mind, one might hold that acting on theism very often results in one acquiring more evidence in support of theism. So, one might contend that acting as if theism is true, motivated by the hope that it is true, is an experiment of sorts in which one takes steps to seek sufficient evidence in support of theism. And, if the experiment proves successful, then the problem of catching belief would be avoided.

I will set aside this response to the problem of catching belief, and will assume that the judgment of theism lacking sufficient evidence is fixed for the friend of (A).[17] How might a friend of (A) seek to defuse what we might call *the problem of catching belief*?

INOCULATION AND CORROSION

This response to the problem of catching belief would involve taking steps to inoculate oneself from catching belief from the faithful with whom one associates as part of implementing (I)–(III). The inoculation could be designed in various ways: one might scale back on the implementation of (I)–(III), or perhaps approach the implementation in an ironical way making belief acquisition less likely, or perhaps not always acting as if theism were true, but alternating that with occasionally acting as if it were false.

[15] *Proslogium* in *Saint Anselm: Basic Writings*, trans. S. N. Deane (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1968), p. 7.
[16] See Jeff Jordan, *Pascal's Wager: pragmatic arguments and belief in God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), pp. 164–74.
[17] For more on this tradition, see William Wainwright, *Reason and the Heart* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).

However the inoculation is designed, it would result in acting as if theism were true, while at the same time taking steps to guard against believing that it is. While space does not permit examining every possible inoculation strategy, let's look at the most promising.

The first inoculation strategy would be to hope that theism is true and to act as if it were, yet, not to accept that it is. By not accepting a proposition, one might lower one's exposure to catching it. Accepting a proposition differs from believing it, as the former is an action under our control, while the latter is largely involuntary, so one might seek to avoid catching a belief by not accepting it in the first place. Recall W. K. Clifford's ship owner, who believes that his ship is seaworthy. Yet, given the stakes involved, the ship owner ought not accept that it is seaworthy without confirming that it is.

While acting as if p but yet not accepting that p does not qualify as an instance of the Moorean paradox, it is nonetheless odd. To not accept that p is either to not assent to p when prompted, or to not include p as a premise in one's deliberations. Since one could not act as if p were true if p is not included as a premise in one's practical deliberations on what to do, this strategy of acting but not accepting requires not assenting to p when prompted. Would not assenting to p while nonetheless acting on it provide adequate protection from catching the belief that p? It is not clear that it would, as we do not know whether the seed of belief requires a seedbed fertilized with both assenting and acting as if to germinate.

Another inoculation strategy might be to act as if theism were true, while concurrently reminding oneself that theistic belief is epistemically unjustified. Like a slave whispering a memento mori in the ear of a Roman commander honored in a triumphant parade, one would vigilantly and constantly recall that one ought not to believe those theistic propositions which, in part, motivate one's behavior. This inoculation strategy envisions an ongoing internal monologue in which one seeks to dissuade belief by a vigilant recall that one ought not believe the very propositions one is acting upon.

This strategy comes at a cost, however, as publically one portrays oneself as a full-fledged devotee, while at the same time, one is internally recalling that one ought not to believe the very propositions one is acting upon. This disconnect between one's public presentation (one's persona, or how one presents oneself to others) and one's private stance (one's private self) would be corrosive to one's integrity, as one's persona would be misaligned with one's private self. One would be in a position to say while I act as if theism were true; I don't believe that it is. Certainly, an observer from afar would be surprised to learn that a person faithfully implementing (I)–(III), by investing time, money, and effort in the causes of a particular theistic tradition, did not in fact believe that theism was true. Indeed, insofar as one's

actions, by acting as if theism were true, influence or serve as a role model for others, one would be exposing others to catching beliefs which one thinks it best to avoid. The misalignment of private self and persona is, then, undesirable as it inclines others toward the acquisition of beliefs that one judges unjustified. While suborning perjury may not be as bad as perjury itself, it is, whether intentional or not, nonetheless bad.[18]

In general, taking steps to shield oneself from contagious theistic belief would have a corrosive effect in another significant way: the reasons one has motivating (T3)—seeking to build a theistic commitment on the basis of hope and not belief—would conflict with one's reasons to inoculate against catching belief. One is pushed to act as if theism were true and yet pulled to act to ensure that one does not come to believe that it is. Whatever commitment might emerge out of this dynamic is not likely one characteristic of a mature or wholeheartedly committed theist. If adopting (A) is motivated in part by a goal of constructing a theistic commitment similar to one founded on a doxastic base, then inoculating against catching belief would probably be self-defeating, as one's steps to inoculate would impede reaching the goal of a doxastic-free yet mature theistic commitment.[19]

TWO CASE STUDIES

Let's conclude by briefly examining two friends of proposition (A): J. S. Mill (1806–73) and Louis Pojman (1935–2005). John Stuart Mill, by the 1860s, "ruled with absolute despotism a large proportion of the so-called

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[18] One might wonder whether the friends of (A) are indictable on a morals charge—that by acting as if theism were true, but all the while not believing that it is, is a kind of immoral deception, or serious hypocrisy. I will allow others to lodge that charge if they wish.

[19] Might the friends of (A) have recourse to a permissibility principle that circumvents the problem of catching belief—perhaps the Principle of Double Effect? As standardly formulated, the Principle of Double Effect asserts that an act α, which has at least two effects—an intended good consequence g and a harmful or bad consequence e—is morally permissible if (i) α is itself good or morally indifferent; (ii) though foreseen, e is not itself intended; (iii) g is not an effect of e; and (iv) g and e are morally commensurate. So, while hoping and acting on theistic propositions is intended to ground a theistic commitment (the good effect), the foreseeable eventuating of theistic belief is the unintended but permissible bad effect. This escape route is closed as the evidentialist commitments associated with (A) stipulate that one may believe that p only if p is well supported by the evidence, while an appeal to the Doctrine of Double Effect would countenance acquiring belief via a non-epistemic way.

educated and thinking men in Great Britain."[20] Despite the hyperbole of the claim, it is true that Mill was a leading public intellectual of the middle period of the Victorian age. So much so that the posthumous publication of his *Three Essays on Religion* (1870) drew not only the expected criticism from the faithful, but also a shocked disappointment from those who expected the "saint of rationalism" to argue for agnosticism.[21] Leslie Stephen is said to have paced his study in angry surprise at the appearance of the *Three Essays*, with his wife seeking to console him by pointing out that "I always told you John Mill was orthodox."[22]

The cause of all this consternation is found in the third of the three essays, "Theism," a short work begun in 1868 and still unfinished when Mill died in 1870. The faithful found "Theism" objectionable because of Mill's criticism of the standard arguments of natural theology. Mill's objections, by the way, are pedestrian at best—though that's not why the faithful found them objectionable. The disappointment of the other side flowed in part from Mill's endorsement of a position that can be summed up by the principle that where the evidence and probabilities yield, there hope can properly take possession. As Mill expressed this principle when discussing immortality:

to any one who feels it conducive either to his satisfaction or to his usefulness to hope for a future state as a possibility, there is no hindrance to his indulging that hope.[23]

Mill was no theist in the standard sense, arguing in "Theism" that a belief in a creator of great but limited power was supported by the design argument. But Mill held that upon a quasi-theistic base one could erect a superstructure of hope for a continuation of existence beyond the grave. As Mill puts it:

in the regulation of the imagination literal truth of facts is not the only thing to be considered. Truth is the province of reason, and it is by the cultivation of the rational faculty that provision is made for its being known always, and thought of as often is

[20] Daniel Seelye Gregory, "John Stuart Mill and the Destruction of Theism," *Princeton Review* 54 (1878): 409. Reprinted in *Mill and Religion: contemporary responses to Three Essays on Religion*, ed. A. Sell (Bristol, England: Thoemmes Press, 1997), pp. 192–7. Alexander Bain is reported to have asked Helen Taylor (the executor of Mill's estate) for permission to edit "Theism" in order to preserve Mill's reputation. See Nicholas Capaldi, *John Stuart Mill: a biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 348.

[21] See A. N. Wilson, *God's Funeral* (London: W.W. Norton, 1999), pp. 41–52; and his *The Victorians* (London: W.W. Norton, 2003), pp. 108–12; and Bernard Lightman, *The Origins of Agnosticism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), p. 27.

[22] Reported in Alan Sell, "Introduction," *Mill and Religion*, p. xvi.

[23] John Stuart Mill, "Theism," p. 210.

required by duty and the circumstances of human life. But when reason is strongly cultivated, the imagination may safely follow its own end, and do its best to make life pleasant and lovely…On these principles it appears to me that the indulgence of hope with regard to the government of the universe and the destiny of man after death, while we recognize as a clear truth that we have no ground for more than a hope, is legitimate and philosophically defensible. The beneficial effect of such a hope is far from trifling.[24]

Mill's issuance of a license to hope is based in part upon pragmatic grounds. It is permissible to hope if and only if:

> L1: For all one knows, the object of one's hope is possible; and,
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> L2: One's hope fits with one's beliefs; and,
>
> L3: One believes that hoping contributes to one's own happiness or the happiness of others.

The first condition ensures that one's hope coheres with one's justified beliefs. One is not hoping in the face of evidence, or despite the evidence, as long as one is in compliance with (L1). The second condition, (L2), employs the notion of fit, a weaker notion than entailment, but a stronger notion than mere coherence. Mill believed that one could hope for survival of death in part because one is justified in believing in a deity. A deity who may, for all we know, have the power and inclination to grant survival. The hope for survival is neither entailed by nor made much more likely than not by a belief in a deity, Mill thinks. Still, the hope of survival fits with belief in a deity, in the sense that it would not be surprising that there is survival if a deity exists. Indeed, it may be surprising that there would be no survival if a deity exists. Such a hope is a natural fit with such a belief. The third condition, (L3), is straightforwardly pragmatic and restricts hope to those who have goals either of personal happiness or of contributing to the happiness of others. Believing that hope results in the promotion of happiness is a necessary condition of a permissible hope in Mill's view.

There is little doubt that Mill agreed with Hume that "the wise man proportions his belief to the evidence" and with Clifford's fiat that it is always wrong to believe anything on insufficient evidence.[25] Mill was no subjectivist or fideist. But hope and belief are not the same; and the standards for the permissibility of the one differ from the standards of the other. If one believes that the dicta of Hume and Clifford should govern any and all propositional attitudes and not just belief, then it is easy to see why Mill's

[24] John Stuart Mill, "Theism," pp. 248–9.
[25] Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982 (1748)), p. 110.

liberal treatment of hope would disappoint. On the other hand, if one believes that morality consists primarily in the promotion of happiness, propositions (L1)–(L3) are not surprising. While Mill evaded the problem associated with proposition (3), he provided no escape from the problem of catching belief. At least in that respect, Mill's project was incomplete.

A contemporary proponent of the thesis that hope is sufficient to support a full-fledged religious commitment, such as implementing (I)–(III), is Louis Pojman. According to Pojman, a religious commitment is, in significant part, not just a way of life, but an acceptance of a particular explanatory theory of the world:

while a religion is also a form of life, a set of practices, it contains a cognitive aspect which claims to make sense out of one's experience. It answers questions why we are here, why we suffer, and why the world is the way it is.[26]

This realist view often comes with costs, as Pojman held that many thoughtful people, though sympathetic to theism, will find themselves doubting that God in fact exists, or that a core doctrine of a particular theistic tradition (such as the doctrine of the Trinity) is true. Conjoining this realist view of theistic claims with the high scruples of evidentialism, and the desire to engage in a religious way of life, provide the ingredients of the problem of catching belief. Moreover, Pojman argued that a robust and sufficient theistic faith does not need belief as it may be properly grounded on hope:

But to believe-in God implies only that one regards such a being as possibly existing and that one is committed to live as if such a being exists.[27]

According to Pojman, believing in God does not imply that one believes that God exists; only that one believes that it is possible that God exists. So, Pojman rejected the widely embraced contention that belief-in x requires believing that x exists. As a result, Pojman held that hoping that God exists, unaccompanied by any belief that God exists, could alone provide an adequate basis for a mature and satisfying religious commitment:

The hoper in God worships with passion and commitment; only he or she acknowledges and is committed to doxastic integrity, to continue the dialogue with those who differ, and regards engaging in the dialogue as one aspect of worship.[28]

Pojman championed a non-doxastic faith in which hope and not belief was the prevailing attitude. Like Mill, Pojman's exposure to the problem of

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[26] Pojman, *Religious Belief and the Will*, p. 196.
[27] Pojman, *Religious Belief and the Will*, p. 228.
[28] Pojman, *Religious Belief and the Will*, p. 232.

catching belief would be very high. Given the steps necessary to inoculate one from the problem would impede Pojman's stated goal of grounding a mature religious commitment on a base of theistic hope.

The problem of catching belief flows out of the fact that chronically acting as if something is true is an effective way of inculcating the belief that it is true. While theistic hope provides fuel for the motor of inculcation, with its desire or preference that theism is true, most of the fuel flows from acting as if it were true. Given this observation, it is clear that the problem of catching belief is not essentially tied to theistic hope. Any non-doxastic model of faith that is put into regular practice, say a model emphasizing trust and not hope as the replacement for belief, coupled with an evidentialist prohibition of belief, will be bedeviled by the problem of catching belief.[29]