



3 | Should Cubs Fans Be Committed? What Bleacher Bums Have to Teach Us about the Nature of Faith

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You know the law of averages says that anything will happen that can. / But the last time the Cubs won the National League pennant was the year we dropped the bomb on Japan.

—STEVE GOODMAN, "A Dying Cubs Fan's Last Request"

Cubs fans love the Cubs, warts and all, no questions asked. This quality is called faith.

—PETER GLENBOCK from the introduction to *Wrigleyville: A Magical History Tour of the Chicago Cubs*

Spring is a time for fresh starts and blooming, a season when even the pessimist is tempted to dream of what might be. For Cubs fans, April is the month that brings with it the blessed guarantee that their team will be at least tied for first place for at least one day (Opening Day). Typically, the rest of the baseball season is not so kind to those who pull for the team from Chicago's North Side. The chilly winds of late September that blow across Lake Michigan not only tend to hold back long fly balls from hometown bats—they are also typically concurrent with both the dying leaves of autumn and the fading post-season dreams of the Cubs and their followers.

Yet it is spring and hope is alive. But should it be? Isn't there something positively irrational about believing, year after disappointing year, that *this* will be the season? Can hope in the absence

of proof, in the absence of anything that even looks like good evidence, be rational? In short, should Cubs fans be committed?

This essay will attempt to answer this question. And in doing so we will, I hope, uncover something about the nature of commitment. We'll begin by considering what it means to be a fan and then apply these principles of commitment to the nature of religious belief and devotion.

What It's Like to Be a Cubs Fan

When you are a genuine fan of a team, you make a commitment. You like them, win or lose. A person who roots for whichever club happens to be winning is a true fan of no team. It goes without saying that Cubs followers are genuine fans. The same cannot be said, for example, for many Yankees fans. A team that has a great deal of success must look skeptically, maybe even cynically, upon those who fill its stands. For wide are the stadium gates of the winners but narrow is the way of true fandom. This, I suggest, is why the Cubs faithful are admired at least as much as they are ridiculed: no one can doubt their sincerity. With Yankees fans, no one can be sure.

To get a sense of the long-suffering nature of Cubs followers, one needs to recall a bit of baseball history. The Cubs didn't win the World Series for a century (give or take a few years) and they didn't win a National League pennant since 1945. Even the Cubs' championship in 1908 turns out to have been won only because of one of the most notorious mistakes in baseball history. The Cubs were trailing the New York Giants by a single game, having made up two games in the previous two days. (It might surprise contemporary Cubs fans to know that in the early part of the last century, the Cubs were a very successful club and winning and vying for pennants was a common occurrence.) But they were behind in 1908 and were trying desperately to overtake the Giants. The two clubs were playing in New York on September 23rd and were tied with two outs in the bottom of the ninth when Al Bridwell lined a single-scoring Moose McCormick from third base. The apparent success of the hometown Giants brought the crowd streaming onto the field and sending the players straight to the clubhouse. This would have been no problem except that Fred Merkle, a nineteen-year-old rookie who was the runner on first base when Bridwell hit his single, went directly to the locker room without touching sec-

ond. Cubs shortstop Frank Evers noticed Merkle's mistake and, to make a long story short, retrieved the ball in the midst of the bedlam and touched second. The umpires convened and decided that Merkle was indeed out and that McCormick's run didn't count. With darkness coming, the umpires called the game a tie. The decision was appealed but the officials backed the umpires' ruling. Furthermore, it was decided that if the Cubs and the Giants finished the season tied, the game would have to be replayed. The Cubs and Giants did indeed finish with identical records and the Cubs won the tiebreaker. Thus, were it not for the mental error of a nineteen-year-old, the Cubs would never have won the 1908 World Series. They've gone nearly one hundred years without a championship and even that title was won only because of a rookie mistake.

There are those who maintain that the Cubs' haplessness is the result of a curse. In the '45 World Series, the Cubs were playing the Detroit Tigers. The owner of a local bar, William "Billy Goat" Sianis bought two tickets for game four. He wanted to take his Billy Goat, "Murphy," to the game and have him sit with him in a box seat. But Murphy smelled, well, like a goat, and the ushers refused to allow him into the park. Sianis was furious and left in a huff, placing a curse on the Cubs. As with most curses, this was not taken seriously. But when the next four seasons saw the Cubs struggling, team owner Philip Wrigley wrote to Sianis and asked him to have Murphy remove the spell. It took Sianis until 1969 to oblige, but one suspects that the curse removal didn't take. For it was in 1969 that the Cubs led the NL Eastern Division most of the season only to collapse in September and be overcome by the "Amazing Mets" who would eventually win not only the pennant but the World Series. In the 2003 post-season Sianis's curse resurfaced when a fan interfered in the eighth inning of game six of the NLCS, giving the Florida Marlins an extra out in the middle of a rally that turned a Cubs lead into an insurmountable deficit. Ahead in the series three games to one, the Cubs went on to lose the NL pennant in seven games.

Why Do People Struggle with Faith?

Cubs fans are tortured souls. Writer, political analyst, and baseball enthusiast George Will has claimed that "Cubs fans are

ninety-three percent scar tissue.” In the same way that Cubs fans hold on to hope even in the midst of a distinct lack of success on the field, the religiously devout hold onto their faith even as, in the western world, religious practices and faith seem to be in retreat. Certainly, the general cultural influence of religion in the United States is at an all-time low. Things are even tougher for the faithful in Europe. Increasingly, it seems to many believers that being a faithful member of a religious community is not unlike being a Cubs fan: it is a condition looked upon with equal parts pity and mystification.

So why do it? Why make a commitment to something that will bring heartache and disappointment (in the case of Cubs loyalty) and sacrifice and persecution (in the case of religious belief)?

Religious faith brings other objections as well. Many argue that faith in a benevolent deity is irrational, others claim that organized religion is a source of social and political stagnation that encourages the poor and displaced to be happy with their earthly lot (with the promise of a heavenly reward at the end of the road).

So how do we proceed? This is a hefty list of serious charges. Let's begin by looking first at the lighter issues—namely, those regarding commitment to the “lovable losers” of the North Side of Chicago. We'll then turn our attention to objections to religious commitment.

Commitment and the Cubs

Are there good reasons to be loyal to the Cubs? We can begin trying to answer this question by noting an important difference between religious institutions and baseball clubs. There is a clear measure of success for the latter: championships won. And it's precisely at this point that Cubs fans may feel particularly uneasy—indeed, even positively queasy. Is it, they themselves may wonder, rational to be committed to a team that has had so little success? We might get started by thinking about the nature of what it is to be a fan, or in other words, the nature of fandom.

Fans are the devotees (that is, the *devout*) of sport. A fan of a team, a genuine fan, has made a commitment. It is a commitment to support the team regardless of the team's success or failure. But it is more than that. It's also a conviction that the team

is fundamentally *worthy* of support. While it is arguably inappropriate to quit supporting a team for the sole reason of lack of success, there are times when withdrawing one's support is not only allowable but perhaps even morally required. A recent example of this in sport can be found in professional basketball. Through the mid to late 1990s and the early 2000s, the Portland Trailblazers made a series of moves that not only stumped their fiercely loyal fan base but went so far as to alienate them. The Blazers appeared to go out of their way to sign players who had caused problems with other teams or had had scuffs with the law or both. (This tendency has led to the team's being dubbed the “Jailblazers.”) While courting and signing such players as Rasheed Wallace and Isaiah Rider, they simultaneously traded or declined to re-sign solid citizens like Clyde Drexler and Terry Porter. They even fired their long-time and beloved radio announcer, Bill Schonely. Many basketball followers in Portland now think of themselves as former-Blazer fans. Should we say that the fans of the Blazers who have since jumped ship were not real fans? I don't think so. By recruiting the sort of players the Blazers recruited, they made themselves not worthy of true fanhood. They gave fans very good reason to quit supporting them. The problem wasn't that the team wasn't winning but that it became morally unworthy of having true fans. Those who continue to pay the players' salaries by buying tickets and attending games are those whose actions are questionable. Loyalty to Mother Teresa is a virtue; loyalty to Adolf Hitler is not. Indeed, it might be that those fans who maintain their support in the face of significant organizational wrongdoing exhibit the same vice that those who exhibit excessive patriotism are guilty of. “My team win or lose” is the declaration of the fan; “my team right or wrong” is the cry of the zealot.

We began by asking if there is reason to be committed to a team that frequently lets down its fans; is the heartache worth it? But in developing the beginning of an answer to this question (an answer we will give more fully in a moment) we have stumbled onto two other reasons people have for not being fans of some teams. The first reason for non-support is exemplified by the above example of the Portland Trailblazers: persistent wrongdoing by the players and a willingness of management to put up with such nastiness as long as the players who commit it can help the team win. So we will need to ask this question

about the Cubs: do they have the same kind of shady history as the recent Portland Trailblazers have? The second new difficulty is in a way similar to the original problem of supporting a team that consistently loses; however, this second new difficulty is in a way worse. It is one thing to be a team that has trouble winning championships or even making the playoffs; but it is another thing altogether to be an organization that apparently doesn't care to win.

A model of how to run a team if you want to drive off true fans is baseball's Florida Marlins of the late 1990s. The Marlins were willing to spend for a championship—for a year. The winter before the 1997 season, the Marlins signed a number of high-priced free agents. They kept them for as long as it took to win a World Series title. But when the Series of '97 was won, they had the "fire sale" of the century. They dumped the big salaries with even more speed than they had exhibited in signing them. (Remarkably, as soon as the Marlins reversed their course, they achieved great success, winning the 2003 World Series.)

In sum, then, it would seem that to be worthy of support, a franchise must be committed to two things: winning and sportsmanship.

Should Cubs fans be committed? Do the Cubs fail either the winning or sportsmanship condition of being fan-worthy? Let's hear the bad news first. Many have claimed that the owners of the Cubs (the Tribune Company) have no interest in spending the money it takes to win as long as they can fill Wrigley Field while they lose. More than one Cubs supporter has defended the team against this allegation while worrying that there was something to it. The Cubs are a big-market team with a large and loyal national fan base, good TV revenues, and an owner with deep pockets. Yet they do not have a record of regularly pursuing the most valuable free agents. Indeed, they have sometimes not been willing to pay the going rate to keep players they ought to try to keep. (The most egregious example of their letting a great player go is their failure to sign Greg Maddux following his Cy-Young-Award-winning 1992 season.) So this criticism has some bite. It is one thing to be committed to a team that regularly loses despite its best efforts; but an organization that is more concerned with making a profit than with winning is not keeping its end of the bargain. The good news for Cubs fans is that it appears that the team is making progress. In recent

years, the Cubs have done more than they have in the past both to keep their stars in the Windy City and to attract high-priced players and managers. Signing Sammy Sosa to one of baseball's most lucrative contracts instead of trading him or losing him to free agency, and signing manager Dusty Baker are both indications that the team is learning that winning requires an investment of more than blood and sweat.

Now for the other possible reason to pull support from a team: bad sportsmanship. Is there any reason for a Cubs fan to feel qualms here? This question needs to be split in two: is the history of the team replete with bad characters? And does the team's current make-up provide reason to root against them? The answer to both of these questions is no. Any organization that has been around for more than a century will have some ruffians and even misanthropes. The Cubs are no exception. The man most closely associated with, and responsible for, the glory days of the Cubs in the late nineteenth century (actually, they were then called the *White Stockings*) was Cap Anson. Yet there is no one in the history of the game who bears more culpability for the exclusion of African-Americans from the major leagues until 1947 when Jackie Robinson broke in. In Toledo for an exhibition game in 1882, Anson demanded that a black player on the Toledo team be removed from the game. In 1887, the New York Giants made a deal for black pitcher George Stovey. When Anson got wind of this he rallied the other owners to insist that the transaction not go through and baseball's color line was thereby drawn.

While Anson's racism is an ugly scar on the franchise, the team's overall complexion is a good one. Ernie Banks is one of the most beloved baseball players of all time—and for good reason. "Mr. Cub" played the game with a joyous spirit that was reflected in his infectious smile. Indeed, Banks' friendly demeanor earned him a second nickname: "Mr. Sunshine." That Banks had such a gracious and easy-going attitude is made all the more remarkable by times. Today, it is easy to forget that African-American players of Banks's era often came to Major League Baseball via the Negro Leagues. Jackie Robinson had broken the color barrier only six years before Banks arrived in the big leagues in 1953. Banks himself endured the racist attitudes and practices of the times. Yet there was never a doubt as to why Banks played: for the love of the game.

Sammy Sosa may make one of baseball's top salaries but there is no doubt that on the field he plays for fun. His good-natured home run dual of 1998 with Mark McGwire captured the interest of the entire nation; and Sammy's grace and good sportsmanship when Big Mac finally broke Roger Maris's single-season home run record was everything one could hope for.¹

So the Cubs are not guilty of the twin sins of fielding a team of charlatans and not being willing to pay for a winning team. Although the franchise has not always been as concerned with winning as one might hope, on balance, commitment to the Cubs is neither foolish nor morally suspect. But what of the heartache objection we began with? Isn't the Cubs' lack of winning (even if innocently 'achieved') reason enough to not be a fan?

Since the answer to this question so clearly mirrors the answer to a question about religious commitment, we will now have a look at objections to faith. In discussing the merits of belief in the face of suffering and persecution we will find our answer about value of commitment to a team that has trouble winning.

The Rationality of Religious Commitment

Is it irrational to believe in God and to commit yourself to a religious life? There are two distinct things the claim of 'irrationality' might mean. One concerns the *epistemic* (and perhaps social) acceptability of religious belief; the other matter is *prudential*. Religious belief fails to be epistemically acceptable if, on balance, there are good reasons for thinking it is false. The qualifier "on balance" is crucial in the previous sentence. For the mere fact that there is a reason, even a pretty good reason, to believe a claim is false does not imply that one is irrational in believing it to be true. For the totality of the evidence might nevertheless be in its favor. However, if the totality of the evidence clearly points to a proposition's being false, and if one is aware of this evidence and recognizes it for what it is, then one believes the claim at the risk of irrationality. Believing a propo-

¹ Sosa's bat corking controversy is discussed in Chapter 7 of this volume.

sition to be true if it has been shown or nearly shown to be false is to hold an irrational belief. So one way of understanding the charge that religious devotion is irrational is as the claim that religious belief has been intellectually discredited.

The second way the charge of irrationality comes in has little to do with the belief's epistemic credibility and more to do with the affect that holding it has on the individual. Remember Will's comment that Cubs fans are ninety-three percent scar tissue. You might wonder why the Cubs faithful do it to themselves. After all, aligning yourself with the Cubs is setting yourself up for pain and disappointment. So why do it? Similarly, being part of a religious community can be costly. The righteous suffer, and their expectation that God will rescue or heal them in this life is often frustrated. Jesus, for example, said to pick up your cross if you are to be his follower (Matthew 16:24); he also predicted that you would face persecution (Matthew 10:23). This is hardly the promise of sunny skies and worry-free life that many make religious invitations out to be. So why are they accepted as often as they are? Isn't it irrational to commit yourself to a cause that will take you down the road of self-sacrifice and suffering?

In a word, 'No.' Why not? Because, contrary to the teaching of the hedonist, life isn't all about smiles and pleasures. There is value in commitment to a cause and in the meaning that such commitment gives. The suffering experienced can be positive: not only because of lessons learned, but because it increases the joy one feels in the good times. No one doubts that the Yankees and their fans are made genuinely happy when they add to their bounty of pennants and championships. But does anyone seriously think that their joy has the height and depth which that of the Cubs or Boston Red Sox and their faithful will experience on that fine day when their droughts have ended? What will make the Cubs and Red Sox fans' rapture complete is not merely the fact that it has been so long since they've won; it is also the fact that they've so often lost, and so often lost after having their hopes raised throughout the course of the season only to have them dashed in September and, occasionally, October.

The religious analogue of winning the World Series is eternal life or union with the One. But it would be wrong to think that the sole reason for religious faith is the ultimate reward. The sin-

cerely devout often say that the life of religious devotion is a sufficient reward of its own. Spiritual richness and an earthly life of meaning more than outweigh the hard-times and sacrifices. An eternal life of bliss is but icing on the cosmic cake.

So the life of faith is not irrational from the point of self-interest. But what about from the epistemic perspective? Faith has been defined as “believing what you know to be false.” If that is correct, then faith is epistemically irrational. Even if one takes this definition of faith to be tongue-in-cheek, one might still think that there are good reasons for thinking that religious beliefs are false and that God doesn’t exist. To believe in God is thus to believe what is false, and that begins to sound a lot like the above definition.

The first thing to notice is that, as far as rationality is concerned, there is an enormous difference between believing what is *in fact* false and believing what *you know* (or even just believe) *to be* false. I might have very good reason to believe that my car will start the next time I get in it even if, as it turns out, my battery has just died and the engine won’t turn over. My current belief that it will start is not shown to be *irrational* (even if it is shown to be *false*) by my car’s failing to start later. On the other hand, if I know that it doesn’t even have a battery and that a car will start only if it has a battery, and yet I believe that when I go out to my battery-less car it will nevertheless start immediately, I believe irrationally.

So for religious belief to be irrational, it isn’t enough that it is in fact false or even that there is, on balance, good evidence against it. The person of faith would have to have her religious convictions while at the same time believing that they are false or that her best evidence entails that they are false. While philosophers like Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) openly embrace faith irrationally, most believers have a different view. They accept that the evidence against God’s existence is not *that* good and that they have reasons to believe in a creator, even if some of those reasons are hard to articulate. Whether they are right about where the preponderance of the evidence lies isn’t really the point. To be epistemically irrational in the most straightforward sense is to hold a belief that even you recognize is not true. Religious believers, like unbelievers, are not often guilty of that.

Still, you might be thinking, isn’t someone irrational if she believes what everyone else thinks is false? For instance, those

who persist in believing that the earth is flat might really think the evidence is with them, but that doesn’t stop the rest of us from viewing them as irrational. Might we not say the same of the devout?

This is a serious question and I haven’t the space here to develop a theory of rationality—which is what it would take to put this issue to rest. But we can at least quiet this nagging doubt with the following point. What makes Flat-Earthers irrational is not that they have a minority viewpoint, but that they reject the opinion of all experts and are fond of conspiracy theories to explain mountains of evidence against their position.

Religious believers, as a group, do neither of these things. That is, there is no group of experts who unanimously assert the truth of propositions they deny. True, there are fundamentalist elements that make claims about the origins of the universe that are routinely, and nearly universally, denounced by scientists (I’m thinking, for example, of claims that the universe is only six thousand years old and was created to be pretty much as it now is in six twenty-four hour days). However, these claims make up no part of the official theology and worldview of any of the major religions. And while some sects are fond of espousing conspiracies, such theories play no serious role in mainstream faith.

We’ve seen no overriding reason for eschewing either religious commitment or loyalty to the Cubs. But we have yet to understand the nature of the commitment we find unobjectionable. We’ll first look at the nature of the loyalty of the true fan in the hope that we can also make a step toward better understanding religious faith.

The Nature of Commitment

What is a *true* fan? And what is the relation between being a true fan of a baseball team and being a faithful member of a religious tradition?

When it comes to having faith in a baseball team, the first and most obvious condition is that one must have a certain kind of pro-attitude toward the team in question. One must *want* the team to win, must have the *desire* that the team do well. Interestingly, being a fan of a team doesn’t require that you want

that team to win the championship. For if it did, no one could be a fan of more than one team. But surely there are fans of more than one team. Residents of New York City, for example, might be both Mets and Yankees fans (even if they are not in doubt about their ultimate allegiance). Perhaps, though, there is the need for the concept of super-fandom: one is a superfan of a team only if one desires that team win its championship. Be that as it may, standard fandom does require that one want the team to do well.

A true fan of a team is not someone who merely wants the team to win *today*. No, the genuine fan will be committed to her team, win or lose; she will be a supporter tomorrow even if the sun is not shining. We tend to think of true fandom as a virtue and of bandwagon-jumping as a vice. But why? What's so great about pulling for a team even when it does poorly? And what's so bad about pulling for any team that is doing well?

Humans rightly value loyalty. Being a loyal friend means being a friend even in the bad times. Fair-weather fans are like fair-weather friends. They display a culpable lack of fidelity. Conversely, one who exhibits genuine fanhood displays the exact same virtue as the good friend. In fact, the true fan can be seen as exhibiting this virtue more selflessly. For the good friend has a reasonable hope and expectation that the friend to whom she is being faithful in the tough times would do the same for her. Even if this expectation is not her motivation for being a true friend, the fact is that she who is loyal is more likely to find friends around during her darkest hour. But the true fan expects nothing of her team in return, or at least nothing that is directed at her. The fan expects her team to be dedicated to excellence and sportsmanship but these virtues are not directed at her.

An unexpected point here is that attitudes toward teams are not voluntarily chosen. While this fact is not often recognized it nevertheless can be understood with only a little reflection. Being a fan of a team, really *wanting* it to win is an attitude that is not under direct voluntary control. If you have doubts about this try this experiment: think of a team you generally root against (for most of us that would be the New York Yankees). Can you now, by a simple act of will, (that is, by just now choosing) decide to become a fan of that team? No, you can't.

You can decide now to *act like* a fan. You can cheer and tell people you are pulling for them, but you can't just choose to like them starting *now*. This doesn't mean, however that you have no control at all.

For example, suppose you grew up in San Francisco and were naturally a Giants fan. To your initial chagrin, the company you work for has transferred you to Chicago where you will reside for many years. Being a baseball fan but having no prior interest in the Cubs, you nevertheless decide to make the best of it and begin regularly attending Cubs games, watching them on local TV, and even listening to them on the radio. You get to know quite a bit about the ownership, the manager, the players, and even the farm system. And the more you know, the more the names, faces, and history are familiar to you, the more you like them. Eventually, you are a Cubs fan. You now pull for the Cubs without trying, and you find yourself disappointed when they don't do well. Although you weren't able to just get up one morning and decide to become a fan, you were able to directly do things that would make this likely. You went to Wrigley Field, you watched games on TV and listened to them on the radio, and you learned about the players and the ballclub. But of course while doing these things will often lead to becoming a fan, such is not always the case. Recall the example of the recent Portland Trailblazers. The regular bad behavior both on and off the court made the team unlikable to many. A person might have moved to Portland expecting to become a Blazer fan but been so put off by both players and management that the more she knew the less she liked them. When it comes to knowing a scoundrel, familiarity rightly breeds contempt.

If it is surprising that one can't simply choose to become a fan of a team, it might be downright shocking to realize that religious belief is also beyond our voluntary control. The reason for this is that belief in general is, like desire, a mental state that is not truly chosen. For example, you undoubtedly believe that Abraham Lincoln was President of the United States during the Civil War. Now if belief is under direct voluntary control, you should be able to stop believing that and to start believing instead that Franklin Roosevelt was. So here's a challenge: give it a try. Try ceasing to believe that Lincoln was President during the Civil War and beginning to believe that FDR was. You can't do it, can you? The reason is that, again as with our desires, we

have only indirect control over our beliefs. You can't come to have a belief just by deciding to. However, as with being a fan of a team, you do have a certain amount of indirect control.

Choosing Faith?

A philosopher who is often misunderstood but who makes an important point relevant to this discussion is Blaise Pascal (1623–1662). Pascal is famous for his “wager.” Crudely put, his argument is this. When you sort through all the reasons for and against God's existence, you'll find that there just isn't compelling evidence for either theism or atheism. The evidence is split; reason can't decide. Yet religion (and he was thinking primarily of Christianity) makes certain demands. Now if you positively disbelieve, then of course you won't heed its commands. But equally, if you don't make up your mind, if you are an agnostic and live out your convictions (so to speak), you won't heed religion's commands either. And if you fail to live a life of religious commitment and devotion, and there is a God, you will miss out on the ultimate good: union with God. So, practically speaking, atheism and agnosticism come to the same thing. And the outcome is possibly even worse than the loss of the greatest good. For according to some religious traditions, rejecting God can result in a hell of an afterlife.

So, Pascal claims, here is your situation: You have your life to bet, and the way you live your life determines where you lay your bet. You must either bet on God or against God; there's no in between. If you bet against God (if you live a nonreligious life) and you are right, what do you gain? Not much. Maybe you have a little more fun for your three score and ten on earth—or maybe you don't. Actually, Pascal thinks that a life that emphasizes the values of religious commitment will be happier in the here and now. But let's suppose that you'd be a little happier if you bet against God and God doesn't exist (than you would be if you bet on God and God doesn't exist). That's your best payoff. But if you bet against God and you are wrong, what is the outcome? Well, at least the loss of an infinite good (eternal union with God) and maybe also the gaining of an infinite “bad” (eternity in hell). Now suppose you bet on God and lose. What does it cost you? At most, a little fun during the earthly life. But suppose you place that bet and win;

suppose that God exists. Then you hit the jackpot. An eternal life of infinite bliss.

Pascal argues, then, that the rational person will bet on God. Since one can't make up one's mind on religious matters by grounding belief on good evidence (remember, according to Pascal the evidence for and against God's existence is split) a rational person will go elsewhere to make up his mind.

Pascal has been unfairly criticized by William James (1842–1910) and others who claim that he presupposes that belief is under direct voluntary control, and that one can choose to believe in God as one can choose to lay a bet. If philosophers like James are right, Pascal's wager will be undercut. For it clearly does suppose that laying the wager is up to us; but if laying the wager amounts to immediately choosing to believe in God, then we aren't in a position to place the bet.

So does Pascal presuppose that belief in God is under our direct control? No he does not; Pascal was not nearly so naïve. Pascal's advice was that once you see that believing in God is in your rational self-interest, then you should do what you can to bring it about. So he recommended going to Mass and “taking holy water” as a way of generating belief. What does that mean? Did he think that somehow holy water could work magic? Not at all. He thought that being part of a religious community and taking part in the religious life could bring about belief in just the same way that going to Cubs games and listening to them on the radio, and reading the sports pages of the Chicago newspapers could bring about Cubs fandom. Once you see the rational preferability of belief in God, you'll want to lay your bet on God. This means living a life of religious commitment. So you'll begin to do what the committed do: that is, go to the church, synagogue, or mosque and start to live according to religious principles. And even if belief in God is an integral part of religious faith, and even if it is not under direct voluntary control, belief will come if you take part in the religious life. As with being a fan of a particular team, you can't simply decide to believe in God, but there are steps you can take that will tend to bring it about.

Baseball and Religious Commitment

Being a fan is oftentimes more an activity than attitude. A true fan must be a *follower of the team*. Just what being a follower of

a team comes to will vary depending on one's circumstances. For example, a true Cubs fan who is a resident of the Windy City and who is of at least moderate means will be disposed to attend a number of Cubs games each year. This condition of fandom isn't strictly necessary: one who has a strong dislike of large crowds or who has physical limitations that make attending a game very difficult can be excused. But one who lives in Chicago, has a reasonable amount of disposable income, attends Bulls and Bears games, but who never goes to see the Cubs is not a true fan. One who lives a great distance from Chicago, in Arkansas, say, and is of modest means might never attend a game and yet still be a true fan. Even so, fandom has its demands. Being a fan requires at least keeping track of the team via the sports page, the Internet, or games on cable.

So a fan will want the team to do well and will follow the team's performance. Are there other attitudes or activities that being a fan entails? In particular, one might wonder if being a fan of a team doesn't require being disposed to believe that team will do well. Can one be a fan of a team even if one believes or expects the team to lose most of its games? That seems possible. Indeed, in most of the past fifty years, Cubs fans have generally expected that their team will not win the pennant. Indeed, there have been years when the general make up of the team in early April gave Cubs fans reason to believe the team would lose the great majority of its games. So then is there no requirement of positive expectations for fandom? This is perhaps a harder call than the other conditions we've been considering. Still, I think this much can be said with confidence: a true fan will tend to look favorably on her team's chances for success. By this I mean that she will tend toward optimism. While it might be that even the best fan will not believe that her favorite team will have a successful season when all the experts predict disaster, she will be inclined to accept favorable predications of her team's success over less favorable predications. So when, for example, the opinion of experts is split, she will pay heed to the voices predicting a good season over those who predict disaster. That is to say, she won't let objective probabilities dictate her attitudes and activities. She'll look positively on her team's post-season chances. But this doesn't mean she'll be blind to the facts or that she'll drastically over-estimate the probabilities.

There is an obvious parallel between fandom so understood and religious commitment. While a religious skeptic will generally be inclined to be unimpressed with anything less than conclusive or at least overwhelming evidence, the believer will tend to put a positive spin on the data. While this distinction between the skepticism of the unbeliever and the epistemic optimism of the devout can be seen in corresponding attitudes toward arguments for God's existence and other sorts of public evidence, I think it is clearest when religious experience is at issue. Suppose two people, a believer and an agnostic, are separately going through difficult times. Each is borderline desperate and feeling at the end of his rope. In the grip of this despair, the believer has a sudden rush of comfort and joy; this experience seems to him to be God reaching out to him and holding him in God's loving arms. The agnostic has a similar experience—this is, a sudden rush of comfort and joy—but being of a skeptical cast, he is inclined to think that this feeling of being comforted is illusory and that the comfort and joy he feels is grounded in a psychological defense mechanism.

Let's play out these respective mindsets a little more. Suppose that the agnostic is asked why he thinks that the feeling of being comforted is illusory. At first puzzled, he says, "Oh, you mean why don't I think that it is God comforting me? Well, I suppose I can't rule that out, but why in the world would I make that assumption? I don't have any evidence of that; in fact, I don't even have anything I think is good reason to believe in God's very existence. Every decent piece of positive evidence seems offset by a negative one. No, while I can admit the bare possibility that my experience is caused by God, I see no good reason to accept that and so I don't."

Now let's ask the believer the parallel question. How do you know that the experience is not just illusory? "Well, what reason do I have for thinking it is illusory? I have a general habit of accepting what seems to me to be true unless I have some good reason not to. The experience I had seemed to me to be the experience of being comforted by God. Could I be wrong? Of course. I don't take myself as being certain that what I experienced is God comforting me. But my lack of certainty here doesn't make this belief any different from most of my other beliefs. In short, I don't see any reason not to accept that things are the way they honestly seem to me."

There is yet another striking parallel between a fan's commitment to her team and a believer's commitment to her faith. We've seen how the true fan does not only pull for her team when it is doing well. Even in a year when projected outcomes are dismal and the team is precisely living up to expectations, the true fan is committed and awaits better days. Things may get so grim that for a time, she may not even like her team much. She will feel frustration and perhaps even disgust. Yet if she is virtuous and she is a true fan, she will continue to support her club even when she doesn't feel like it. She will have what philosophers sometimes call a second-order attitude: she'll believe that her current bad attitude is only temporary, that tomorrow or the day (or week or month) after that she'll feel differently. Second-order attitudes like this are familiar enough: a fight with a friend might cause you to feel as though you never want to see him again, while all the time you recognize that after your anger subsides you will feel differently than you do now.

The parallel between this aspect of fandom and religious commitment is close. There are dark days for the devout, days when joy is gone and peace is not found, when even the eyes of the faithful see a world that appears without meaning and mercy. During these times the faithful who are virtuous do not lose hope. Rather, the devout recognize that feelings and emotions can be fickle and that they can unduly influence our perceptions and beliefs. The importance of this point can scarcely be exaggerated in the realm of religious commitment. What makes someone committed to a faith is not the feelings she has at the moment; it is the course of the person's life and what she values and cherishes in the long run that determine her faithfulness or lack thereof.

Who Should Be Committed?

So what are we to conclude? Should Cubs fans be committed? Of course, that question is partially a joke: there is no reason for your average Cub fan to be institutionalized. But neither is there a reason for a Cubs fan to not be a Cubs fan. The organization has not committed the atrocities against sportsmanship that basketball's Portland Trailblazers have. It has also recently been committed to adding players and managers that can help it win.

We've seen that to be a true fan requires both an attitude and action. It requires commitment and perseverance. In this, genuine fandom and religious commitment are alike. In closing, I'd like to point out one more similarity between the two. In committing yourself to a cause, you reach out to something beyond yourself and thereby form a bond with others who are similarly committed. If the nature of the organization or institution to which one is committed encourages loyalty from a homogeneous group, then this commitment likely does no more than duplicate already existent ties. However, baseball is not like this. Baseball fans come from all walks of life, are of all ages, and are an increasingly international group. In the Friendly Confines (a nickname for Wrigley Field), CEOs sit next to short-order cooks, plumbers sit next to professors, octogenarians sit next to eight-year-olds, and recent immigrants sit next to the native born. All are equal as fans of the national pastime.

The same kinds of cross-cultural and trans-class bonds are found in religious institutions as well. In most of the major religions, the fundamental equality of humankind is a basic tenet of faith. Humans of all ages, backgrounds, nationalities, and genders are unified in their faith. In the Christian tradition, this point is made clearly by St. Paul in his letter to the Galatians. "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (3:28).

If fidelity to something larger than yourself, and shared with people from all walks of life is a virtue, and if loyalty is also of moral value, then by all means, let Cubs fans and believers of all stripes be committed.