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Agatheism: A Justification Of The Rationality Of Devotion To God

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First I argue that evidentialism, fideism, and consequentialism are unsatisfactory ways of evaluating the rationality of devotion to God. Next I argue that an adequate evaluation of the rationality of such devotion must be an axiological enterprise. But given the perfect-being conception of God as infinitely perfect goodness, it follows that no individual could be a greater good or would ensure greater good than God. Therefore, it seems rational to hope that and live as though God exists as long as there is no conclusive proof that God does not exist.

I. Introduction

My objectives in this paper are twofold: to critique three approaches to the evaluation of the rationality of devotion to God, and to develop and defend a fourth approach that I think has much to offer. Before proceeding to my critiques, here is how I will be using several key terms.

The use of "God" that I shall start out with is that which, broadly speaking, is found in the personalistic, monotheistic traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, according to which God is a personal being who created, sustains, and guides the universe. This is what Thomas Morris calls "the creation conception of God," as distinguished from "the perfect-being conception of God." I begin with the creation conception of God because it is that conception which enables many people to gain negative leverage on the question of the rationality of devotion to God. Later I will give reasons for rejecting that conception and preferring the perfect-being conception.

The concept I intend by "devotion" to God is that of a consciously God-centered life that consists of endeavoring to live wholeheartedly according to the will and spirit of God as best one understands them, and ever endeavoring for a better understanding of them, such endeavor arising from gratitude and adoration. Theistic devotion is the self-conscious endeavor to enter and maintain—and perhaps more important, to re-enter and maintain—a right relationship to God.
II. Propositional Attitudes

I should also say how I shall be using "knowledge," "belief," "faith," and "hope." In ordinary language these terms are interrelated so closely as to muddle philosophical as well as lay discussions. However, my primary concern is not with these terms; it is with four concepts associated with them that I have found very useful when kept distinct. Consequently I will give these concepts sharp edges so that each of the preceding terms will be associated with a distinct conceptual contribution, and so that together they will cover most of what I want to say about religious reasoning and devotion.

By "knowledge" I shall in this paper mean knowing that one knows. The distinction between knowing and knowing that one knows is an important one that I accept, but it is the latter kind of knowledge, viz., the kind we have, that is our objective when we are, for example, examining or constructing arguments for or against the existence of God. Consequently, for the purposes of this paper I will use "knows that \( p \)" as synonymous with "knows that one knows that \( p \)." 4

"Belief," as I shall use the term here, consists of thinking that a proposition is true because of reasons or evidence which one thinks do not prove that the proposition is true but do indicate that it is probably true.

"Faith," as I shall use the term here, is conceptually distinct from knowledge and belief because although it is a conviction that \( p \) is true, it is a conviction-not-derived-from-evidence-or-argument. In ordinary language "faith" is associated most closely with religious conviction, but the concept of faith I am using here is not limited in scope to religious conviction. In my sense one can have faith that a kidnapped child is still alive, that there is life on other planets, and that the laws of nature will not change. 5

By "hope that \( p \) is true" I mean desire that \( p \) be true because one thinks that it would be good if it were true, and intention to make \( p \) true insofar as it is possible and appropriate. Sometimes hope does not motivate action because one thinks it impossible that one’s action could contribute to the realization of what one hopes, e.g., that there is now life on another planet in our solar system. Regarding occasions on which one believes that one’s action would contribute to the realization of what one hopes, we need to keep in mind that there are two very different kinds of thing that one might intend to realize by one’s action. On the one hand, one’s action might be intended to contribute to the actualization of a desired entity, as when one hopes that one can construct a house for oneself and acts on that hope. On the other hand, one’s action might be intended to contribute to the actualization of a desired relation with an entity that one thinks exists, as when one writes and mails letters to one’s mate, long held hostage by terrorists, in the hope that she is receiving them but without having any reason for more than a year to think that she is still receiving them, and having some reason to think that
she is no longer alive. Because action is motivated by desire and guided by knowledge, belief, and/or faith, I hope to show that hope can play a profound and pervasive role in motivating a rational religious life.6

III. Rationality and Religious Devotion

Now for my critique of three approaches to the evaluation of religious devotion: evidentialism, fideism, and consequentialism. These terms, too, are in common use, but without standardized meanings, so again I plead for indulgence in the hope that my uses of these terms are sufficiently close kin of other uses to allow me into the family debate. My objective is to develop a typology that maps onto life in useful ways.

A. Evidentialism

The famous troika of John Locke, David Hume, and W. K. Clifford articulated the central thesis of evidentialism when they insisted that belief should be proportioned to evidence. In Clifford’s exquisite words, “It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.”7 From that thesis, together with the point that it would be irrational to be devoted to something that one did not believe to exist, it follows that religious devotion is rational only if available evidence indicates clearly that there is or probably is a God. Hence, it is an evidentialist sentiment that sufficient evidence for belief that God exists is a necessary condition for rational devotion to God. Therefore, if one’s research regarding the existence of God shows that the probability of the existence of God is 50/50 or less, then it would be wrong for one to begin or continue to be devoted to God.

B. Fideism

Fideism does not agree with evidentialism that a positive balance of evidence that God exists is a necessary condition of a rational conviction that God exists. Fideism holds that it can be perfectly rational to affirm as true a proposition that one cannot prove or even show to be probably true. If this weren’t so, it claims, we would all be hopelessly irrational because having such convictions is natural and inescapable in any viable form of human life. Among the most common of such convictions are “Physical objects are made of matter,” “Other people have a subjective life,” and “It is wrong to torture an infant.” Faith that God exists, it is claimed, is also a rational conviction—or at least can be. Hence, as long as we have epistemically responsible faith that God exists, we need not be deterred from devotion to God by inadequate or conflicting evidence, or by a negative balance of evidence regarding the existence of God.8

To avoid some confusion, I note that there are two very different meanings of “faith.” The first meaning is that which, rightly or wrongly, is associated
with Søren Kierkegaard. According to this position, faith is an action, specifically, a free and unforced leap of affirmation. I will call this conception of faith “actional faith.”

Another prominent conception of faith views it as a passion, rather than an action. The flavor of passional-fideism, as I shall call it, has been captured superbly by David Hume. Hume says that evidence from our own senses is the most powerful kind of evidence that we can have and that everything else, such as memory and the testimony of other people, shades off quickly from there. Hence, religious doctrines, such as the resurrection of Jesus, that have been transmitted from the remote past and contradict experience and commonsense would never be held were they not “brought home to every one’s breast, by the immediate operation of the Holy Spirit.” Hume goes on to say of the Christian religion that, “Mere reason is insufficient to convince us of its veracity: And whoever is moved by Faith to assent to it, is conscious of a continued miracle in his own person, which subverts all the principles of his understanding, and gives him a determination to believe what is most contrary to custom and experience.” I think Hume was wrong to say that Christian faith subverts the principles of human understanding. One can have Christian faith and be epistemically astute. Moreover, one might in faith hold something to be true which in no way is “contrary to custom and experience”; e.g., one who is lost in a forest at night might have passional faith that she will be found unharmed. However, I think Hume was correct that passional-faith occurs independently of the machinery of evidential justification and so is something that happens to one—whether or not by action of the Holy Spirit. Passional-faith that God exists consists of a conviction that was not arrived at by means of reasoning or evidence and that may survive in spite of evidence that seems to count against its truth. It is this kind of faith that I shall be speaking of herein, ordinarily.

However, even if fideism is correct that passional-faith that God exists does not need to be justified evidentially in order to be rational, that does not entail that devotion to God can be rational without being justified axiologically. Devotion is a form of action and so cannot be adjudicated adequately apart from a consideration of values. Hence, axiological justification of actional-faith, which is a species of devotion, is called for even if evidential justification of passional-faith is not. There is a clear difference of kind between being justified in having passional-faith that God exists and being justified in being devoted to God. One might have faith that God, the personal creator of the universe, exists, yet also conclude that devotion to God would be wrong because God is morally indifferent, monstrous, or in some other way unworthy of devotion. Clearly, then, rational faith that God exists is not a sufficient condition of rational devotion to God.
C. Consequentialism

In contrast to evidentialism and fideism, the consequentialist approach to the justification of religious devotion is axiological from the start: whether one should be religious, and if so, how, is to be determined by comparing the consequences of being religious and not being religious, and from comparing the consequences of being religious in this way rather than that way. According to consequentialism, it might be rational to be devoted to God even if there is not a preponderance of evidence in favor of God's existence, even if one does not have passional-faith that God exists, and, indeed, even if one has passional-faith that God does not exist.

Perhaps the clearest example of religious consequentialism is Pascal's Wager. Whenever I present Pascal's Wager to my students, some of them always object to it immediately because it is such a transparently self-serving approach to the question of whether to devote oneself to God. It seems clear that a Pascalian consequentialist would 'devote' herself to God not out of reverence for God, but, rather, for the sake of achieving an end, such as avoidance of hell or enjoyment of heaven. Moreover, a clear implication is that if a consequentialist theist were to decide later that she had found a better deal elsewhere, she would promptly take it and turn away from God, who from the consequentialist point of view is only a means to an end.

Hence, consequentialism makes an absolute of something other than God, viz., whomever or whatever is the intended beneficiary of the consequences of one's being religious, and it subordinates to that beneficiary everything else, including God. But that seems to show that consequentialism is not even compatible with devotion to God. It is a way of life that is a competitor to religious devotion, so it cannot serve as a measure of the rationality of religious devotion. Rather, the rationality of these two ways of life must be judged by a higher criterion.

In conclusion, evidentialism is correct that we have moral obligations regarding our beliefs and our use of the term "belief," but—for reasons soon to be stated—I think it would be wrong to hold that the rationality of devotion to God turns upon the strength of one's evidence concerning the existence of God (unless, of course, one believes one's evidence proves that there is no God); fideism claims that affirmation of the existence of God need not be justified by evidence in order to be rational, yet even if that is true, faith that God exists is not a sufficient condition for rational devotion to God; consequentialism is wrong to hold that the rationality of religious devotion turns upon its consequences for the devotee, but it is right that evaluation of religious devotion is an axiological affair. Building on the last point, I turn to my second objective, viz., development of a fourth approach to evaluation of the rationality of religious devotion.
D. Agathism & Agatheism

Development of this alternative will be facilitated by the introduction of two words, “agathism” and “agatheism.” I shall use “agathism” to refer to the doctrine that one ought to endeavor always with all of one’s heart, soul, mind, and strength to understand what is the highest good and to be devoted wholeheartedly to it. If one thinks that the highest good is a natural possibility, such as world-wide communism, then one ought to be devoted to actualizing that possibility; if one thinks that the highest good is a supernatural actuality, such as God, then one ought to be devoted to being related rightly to that actuality.

Agathism is explicitly axiological and agrees with consequentialism that the proper court for evaluation of the rationality of religious devotion is not the court of existential evidence but the court of axiological consideration. But agathism does not agree with consequentialism that consequences are the criteria of the rationality of religious devotion, or of any other way of life. Agathism holds that the rationality of devotion is determined solely by the intrinsic goodness of the object of devotion—a point to which we will return.

I shall use “agatheism” to refer to that species of agathism which holds that the highest possible good, and therefore to which we ought to be devoted, is a unique, supremely perfect personal being, who is most fittingly called “God.” In this “perfect-being conception of God,” the idea that conceptually determines everything else about God is that God is perfect goodness.

To the agathist, then, the good life is a life devoted to the good, or more precisely, to that good than which none greater can be conceived; to the agatheist, the good life is a life devoted to God, who is that good than which none greater can be conceived. Now for some thoughts about how one might justify the doctrine of agatheism.

IV. God as Uniquely Worthy of Devotion

For more than 2000 years the nisus of middle-eastern and western thought about God has been to conceive of God as the highest possible being, the supremely perfect being, the being than which none greater can be conceived. Part of the work of philosophical theology has been to examine that concept for intelligibility and coherence and to draw out its implications as to which attributes do not apply to God, which do, and how those that do should be conceptualized. This project was clearly at the heart of Gordon Kaufman’s book *The Theological Imagination*, which is subtitled, *Constructing the Concept of God*. In that book Kaufman says, “God is the perfect attachment-figure to whom one’s absolute loyalty and devotion can and should be given....” What I want to say proceeds in that tradition, which Thomas Morris calls the “Anselmian tradition” or “perfect being theology.”

My foundational point is that a supremely perfect being must also be supremely perfect goodness. I have spoken a great deal about goodness, and
the concept of goodness is at the heart of my paper, so what do I mean by "goodness"? I wish I could say in good conscience, "It's a simple property that cannot be defined. You know what it means or you don't." But I cannot, so I will say something briefly now and hope to pursue the issue more fully in a subsequent paper.

To me it has been illuminating to explore Thomas Aquinas' conviction that being and goodness are the same in reference but different in meaning, even as "The Morning Star" and "The Evening Star" are the same in reference but different in meaning. Nothing can be good apart from actuality, and nothing can be actual without being good. From those convictions, which I will not defend now, I infer that supremely perfect being is identical with supremely perfect goodness, and vice-versa. Moreover, it seems to me that a supremely perfect being would be infinitely perfect goodness, and that infinitely perfect goodness would be a person who is not characterized by envy or cruelty or indifference to the welfare of others, but, rather, by fairness, graciousness, justice, mercy, compassion, and agape love.

It is crucial here to keep in mind that moral goodness is not the only kind of goodness; power and knowledge are also goods. Consequently, in order for a being with moral attributes to be supremely perfect, those attributes must be complemented by the attributes of perfect knowledge and perfect power. A perfectly loving being who was ignorant of what love called for or was impotent to do what love called for would not be infinitely perfect goodness and therefore would not be a supremely perfect being.

It also seems clear that infinitely perfect goodness could not exist merely as an unactualized possibility or a Platonic form or a concept in human minds; rather, it must exist as a fully actual individual. Hence, being actual, as well as omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent, is a necessary condition of being infinitely perfect goodness, i.e., of being God.

V. The Rationality of Devotion to God

I think that the concept of a supremely perfect being is intelligible and coherent, and I believe that this being, and this being alone, would be worthy of unqualified devotion. Any lesser being would be less worthy of such devotion because it would be less good in some respect.

One reason to hope that there is such a being is because if there is, then reality is all the more wonderful for including an individual than which none greater can be conceived. Such a hope seems analogous to hoping that reality includes mineral, plant, and animal life even more wonderful than that of which we are already aware—or, perhaps better, includes forms of life that are as much more wonderful than animal life than animal life is more wonderful than plant life. Another reason for hoping that there is a God is because if there is a God, then in spite of the fact that there seem to be possible worlds
that are too meaningless or horrible to be worthy of existence, this world is not one of them, as God would not create or allow a world that was not sufficiently good to be worthy of existence.\textsuperscript{15}

To be sure, to hope that God exists is not to know that God exists, and religious devotees should be responsive to arguments which claim to prove that there is no God, but they need not be concerned about probability or plausibility arguments against the existence of God.\textsuperscript{16} Those who conceive of God as infinitely perfect goodness will, as long as they rationally think it possible that there is a God, be quite rational in continuing to hope that God exists. What could be more wonderful than that supremely perfect goodness be actual? How could it be irrational to have and maintain such a hope? It seems axiomatic that the better a possibility is, the better it would be if it were actual. If that is true, it seems eminently rational to hope that that possibility than which none greater can be conceived, \textit{viz.}, God, is actual.

Even if you agree that it is rational to \textit{hope} that there is a God, you still might want to know how in the absence of evidential probability that there is a God it could be rational to \textit{live} as though there were a God, so let's consider an analogy that does not involve God. It would not be irrational for me to continue to search a lake and its environs for a child that I concede, along with everyone else, has almost certainly drowned. If you ask me if I \textit{believe} that the child has drowned, then I will say "yes"—but I will add that I \textit{hope} that my belief is false and that I think that my continued efforts to find the child alive are justified by the great good that would obtain were I to succeed.

Consider also that the more probable nuclear war becomes, the harder we should work to prevent it—even if it becomes improbable that we can succeed. The justification of such behavior in spite of daunting odds would be the evil that would be averted and the good that would be achieved if we succeeded.

To be sure, if someone proves to our satisfaction that success in these matters is impossible, then it would be irrational for us to pursue it. Conviction that an end is impossible to achieve precludes rational efforts to achieve it. But short of that extremity, there is a kind of sliding scale or correlation between how good something would be and how justified we would be in being devoted to it in spite of unfavorable odds. Hence, devotion in spite of highly unfavorable odds is not necessarily irrational. Indeed, such devotion might be the height of rationality—as it is, I think, in the case of those people who are desperately trying to save our natural environment in spite of a decreasing probability that they can succeed. In brief, adequate evaluation of the rationality of action inescapably involves axiological considerations, and the more important something is, the more justified one is in being devoted to it.
An obvious disanalogy between the preceding examples and the case of religious devotion is that our actions can make a difference to whether an endangered child is saved or nuclear war is averted, but they will make no difference to whether there is a God. Recall, however, that in addition to actions that save, maintain, or produce an entity or state of affairs that is intrinsically good, such as a child or world peace, there are actions that are intended to maintain or actualize a right relation to an actual good (or what is thought to be an actual good). Devotion to God belongs to this second type of action.

If there is a God, then it seems plausible that the highest level of being for a creature is to exist in a right relation to God, who is supreme goodness. For a rational creature that would involve knowing God in one’s mind, acknowledging God in one’s heart, and honoring God in one’s actions. If there is no God but only a concept of God, then still, it seems to me, as long as we do not know that there is no God, the life than which none better can be lived by a human being is a life lived as though there is a God. Why? Because such a life would involve an ongoing effort to conceive of the highest good and to live according to it.

Clearly, however, it can be or become irrational to pursue an improbable objective. If a person urgently needs $10, it would be irrational for her to bet her only $10 to win $15 with a 2 out of 5 chance of winning. Also, if continuing to search for a child which has almost certainly drowned would seriously endanger the lives of other people for whom one is responsible, then although one may continue to hope that the child is alive and will return safely, one should not continue to search.

Isn’t there also going to be a point beyond which the improbability of the existence of God rationally precludes devotion to God? For two reasons, I do not think so. First, if one accepts the principle that I argued for earlier, viz., that it can be rational to pursue an end even when one believes that it is not probable that a necessary condition of achieving that end obtains, then we must allow prima facie the possibility that it is not irrational to be devoted to God when one thinks it is not probable that God exists. Allowing this means that there cannot be a clean evidential cut-off point, such as not probable (50% or less) or improbable (less than 50%), at and below which it is irrational to be devoted to God. No lower number short of 0% would seem to objectively obligate cessation of devotion.

If the preceding is correct, my critic might respond that devotion is one among a set of mutually exclusive alternatives. If we choose devotion to God, it is at the expense of something else. Consequently, when the probability of the success of religious devotion is sufficiently low because of the low probability of the existence of God, then the higher probability of achieving some other good which is incompatible with devotion to God might render irratio-
nal the choosing of devotion to God over that other good. By comparison, if
the probability is very high that John, age 95, is brain dead, and the proba­
bility is very high that Jack, age 5, can be saved by an operation and return
to a normal life, but neither of them can survive without the aid of a machine
that can serve only one of them, then it would be irrational to take Jack off
the machine in order to save John. Similarly, if a person believes that the
probability that she can enjoy a certain good is higher than the probability
that she can have a right relation to God (because she thinks that the proba­
bility that God exists is low), wouldn't it be irrational for her to choose the
good of a right relation to God over the other good?

If we approach this question quantitatively, then presumably for each al­
ternative we need to multiply the evidence factor by the value factor and
prefer that alternative with the highest probability/value product. But God is
infinitely good, so any positive evidential decimal number, no matter how
small, multiplied by infinity will be larger than any positive evidential deci­
mal number multiplied by a finite number (to represent the finite good that
is the alternative to God), no matter how large. Hence, it does not seem
irrational to place a right relation to God ahead of every other good.

Furthermore, the insistence that we must choose between God and other
goods is a false dilemma because being rightly related to God is compatible
with any other good which is worthy of choice; indeed, a right relation to
God would seem to be the best way of ensuring that one is rightly related to
other goods. For example, it might seem that there could be a conflict between
how one relates to God and how one relates to one's children (e.g., neglecting
one's children for religious reasons), but this, too, turns out to be a false
dilemma because of God's will for those children.

More generally, it is by our understanding of God that we should discern
how we should relate to God and others. Moreover, as long as we do not
know for certain that God does not exist, it seems impossible that there could
be an obligation which would rationally preclude devotion to God conceived
as supreme goodness. To be sure, our existential beliefs should be determined
by our evidence, but our actions should be oriented to the good. A critic might
ask, "But don't we have an obligation to live our lives according to how
actuality probably is and not merely according to how we would like it to
be?" Yes and no. In what way and to what extent we should take existential
probability into account is an axiological matter. Agatheism does not involve
a disregard for reality, but it recognizes that values play a critical role in the
determination of rational action.

Perhaps the last point puts into relief a watershed between two approaches
to life: the one approach says that in order to act rationally we must first
determine what reality is or probably is (in the pertinent respects) and then
the values we act on should be tailored to that picture of reality; for example,
if it does not seem to a person that there probably is a God, then that person should act only on values that are not predicated on the concept of God. The other side says that rational action is primarily value driven so that to act rationally consists primarily of acting so as to promote what one considers to be the greatest good in the situation. Hence, how the relevant existential probabilities are to be taken into account is itself an axiological issue, as is indicated by the examples of the lost child and the prospects of nuclear war and ecological disaster. It could be rational to pursue the child, world peace, and a sound ecology in spite of the improbabilities of success, and it could be rational to pursue a right relation to God in spite of its appearing improbable that God exists.

In brief, it is the belief of the agatheist that the concept of God is the most adequate concept of the supreme good and that, therefore, if God exists, then the best thing for any of us is to be rightly related to God. If God does not exist, then the agatheist is nonetheless living a rational life by endeavoring to live according to the greatest good that she can conceive.

It is important to note that according to agatheism God is worthy of devotion not because he can do us the most good, though he can, but simply because he is the most good—indeed, is unsurpassable goodness and therefore is uniquely worthy of unqualified awe, adoration, and allegiance. That is why agatheism is not a form of consequentialism. The devotion of the agatheist is not for the sake of a consequence of the devotion; it is because the devotion is right in itself.

Still, insofar as we are concerned that history not be meaninglessly painful and tragic, it seems to me that it is rational to hope that there is a God, for in so hoping we would be hoping that there is someone who can and will redress and redeem as much as is possible the injustices and cruelties of history. Not to hope that there is a God seems to me presumptuous or callous—as though one thinks one knows that the injustices and cruelties of history cannot be redressed or as though one doesn’t care whether they are redressed. To hope that there is not a God seems to me monstrous—as though one approves and applauds the sufferings and severed lives of others, e.g., families that have been traumatically separated by slavery or terrorism, and individuals who have been struck down before or during their creative prime.

As is obvious and was noted earlier, our hoping will make not a bit of difference to whether there is a God. Rather, religious hoping is expressive of what one thinks is or would be the highest good. Does this mean that religious hope will end in idle sentiment? that the religious devotee will spend her life praising God and neglecting God’s creatures? Not at all. It seems to follow from the concept of God as infinitely perfect goodness that God loves his creatures and desires their welfare. To be sure, if God exists, then God is
the greatest actual good. However, the Kingdom of God, i.e., a community of creatures who are in a right relationship with God and therefore with one another, is the greatest potential good. Hence, whereas hope that God exists cannot rationally motivate us to do anything to make it true that God exists, it should motivate us to do all we can to actualize the Kingdom of God.20

Consequently, it is intriguing that David Hume, who has shaken the belief of so many theists, was, I think, right or very close to right in suggesting that "...the most genuine method of serving the divinity is by promoting the happiness of his creatures.” Martin Buber and Philip Phenix expressed a similar sentiment by saying that we serve God best by building community.21 Even if the classical conception of God is correct that God needs nothing from us and therefore wants nothing from us for himself, that does not mean that God wants nothing from us. Reason and scripture testify independently that God, a perfectly good person, wants us to promote the well-being of ourselves and others. Insofar as God wants us to be devoted to himself, it is not because he needs devotion; it is because he knows that our fulfillment lies in a right relationship to him. It seems, then, that the ethical implications of agatheism include all that is best in humanistic ethics and then some, as the God of whom I speak is the just but wise and loving sovereign of all. By the grace of such a God and in God’s Kingdom all worthy humanistic ideals will be fulfilled, including freedom, justice, beauty, truth, and compassion.

The concept of God, then, is the concept of the greatest possible individual; the concept of the Kingdom of God is the concept of the greatest possible society that includes free creatures. God is either actual or impossible. If God is actual, then the Kingdom of God is possible—but potential rather than actual. We cannot actualize God, but we can help actualize the Kingdom of God. Given the nature of that kingdom, surely it is rational to hope it is possible and to do all we can to actualize it on earth as fully as we can while calling on God’s grace for guidance, strength, forgiveness, and transformation—recognizing that God alone can take his kingdom to completion.22

I would like to focus what I’ve been saying by adapting a point from Søren Kierkegaard, who said that what oxygen is to breathing, possibility is to hope. The most important possibility, I submit, is the possibility that there is a God. If there is a God, then the conditions for maximal creaturely good are optimal—at least so far as they are not dependent on the free choices of creatures. For this reason the agatheist need not feel troubled by the flitting specter of Great Pumpkin arguments which claim that allowing hope to be based on mere possibility would open a Pandora’s box of silly and irrational hopes. In hoping that God exists, the agatheist is hoping that something exists which subsumes all other goods and ensures that creaturely goods will be optimized to the extent that free creatures are devoted to God.
In conclusion, when God is thought of as infinitely perfect goodness, it seems consummately rational to hope that there is a God and to live as though there is, as long as there is no conclusive proof that there is not. Until such a proof is produced, it seems to me that Blaise Pascal was correct when he said: "...there are two kinds of people one can call reasonable; those who serve God with all their heart because they know Him, and those who seek Him with all their heart because they do not know Him."23

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NOTES


2. Among those people are David Hume's fictitious Philo, who many think speaks for Hume in his Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion. See also Maurice De Bona, Jr., who says in his God Rejected (Culver City, California: Desserco Publishing, 1976), p. 3: "[But even] if there is a God, there is no reason why he should be perfect.

3. I think it is of devotion that Moses is speaking in Deuteronomy 6:5 and Jesus in Matthew 22:37. Also, there is a wonderful passage on devotion in René Descartes' The Passions of the Soul, Part Two, Paragraph 83.

4. In English "know" is used sometimes to mean that one knows that one knows—though we usually put some 'English' on the word when we use it that way, as when we say, "I know that's the case!" "Know" is used also for non-probative knowledge. When we use the locution "A knows that p" to mean conjointly that A is justified in thinking that p and that p is true, we allow that we can know that p without knowing that we know that p, as the causes of or reasons for our thinking that p may justify our thinking that p without proving that p. However, if our reasons are not probative, then even though we know that p, we would not be justified in claiming to know that we know that p, as we do not know that we know that p—though we might be justified in claiming to believe that we know that p. But, then, how can non-probative knowledge figure into assessing whether we are being rational in thinking that p or performing some action that presupposes a conviction that p? In such an assessment, mustn't non-probative knowledge be assessed on the basis of probability, coherence, or some other criterion, as we do not know whether what we think in the mode of non-probative knowledge is knowledge or not? So isn't the fact that our non-probative knowledge is knowledge an epistemically useless, because unknown, fact? It is for these kinds of reasons that for present purposes I focus on the contrast between probative knowledge and evidential belief, leaving aside the concept of non-probative knowledge.

To be sure, if p is true, then I would rather non-probatively know that p than not know it at all, but I would rather know that I know it than merely know it. Moreover, I think that insofar as we as philosophers are operating under the lure of an epistemic ideal, that ideal is to achieve knowledge that we know that p, and not merely to achieve non-probative knowledge that p (which we never know that we have even when we have it). Our objective
as philosophers is to achieve as much knowledge as we can by means of reason, and
to achieve knowledge by means of reason is in its strongest form to know that we
know.

To be sure, construing "knows" to mean "knows that one knows" generates an infinite
regress because it entails that for the "knows" at the end of every "knows that one knows"
one can substitute "knows that one knows." However, the regress is benign for two
reasons. First, as explained above, it is a logical fact that the regress is infinite, but it need
not be a psychological fact. The logical fact entails that whenever I know that I know something, then in principle I could merely by reflection know an infinite number of things
because merely by reflecting on the fact that I know that I know, I could know that I know
that I know, and so on, ad infinitum. However, the in-principle-possibility of this infinite
regress does not entail that I must have completed such a regress in order to know that I
know that $p$. Rather, the logical infinitude of the regress requires only that in order to know
that I know that $p$, I must understand that there is such a regress and that nothing in the
regress could undermine my knowing that I know that $p$. For example, I know that I know
that in the decimal expansion of one-third there is no number larger or smaller than 3
because although I have not examined the infinite string of discrete numbers in the decimal
expansion of one-third, nonetheless by virtue of my understanding of the relevant math­
ematical concepts and their relations, I understand that it is impossible that there could be
any number other than a 3 in the decimal expansion of one-third.

I examine some of these issues more fully in "Faith as Imperfect Knowledge," Logos,

5. Patrick Lee and, I think, Thomists in general use "opinion" as I use "belief" and
"belief" as I use "faith." See Lee's "Reasons and Religious Belief," Faith & Philosophy,
volume 6, number 1, January 1989, pp. 19-34.

6. These characteristics of hope are adequate for my purposes here, but hope is, of
course, a much richer concept and phenomenon. See, for example, Stewart Sutherland's
University Press, 1989), pp. 193-206. Sutherland agrees with Jonathan Harrison that we
cannot meaningfully hope for what we think to be impossible or inevitable, and he
discusses whether we must think that what we hope for is probable or causally possible.
See also Joseph J. Godfrey's A Philosophy of Human Hope (Boston: Martinus Nijhoff,
1987), and chs. 6 and 7 of Richard Creel's Religion and Doubt, Second Edition (Engle-


8. My conception of fideism is broad enough to include John Calvin, Blaise Pascal,
Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Alvin Plantinga, though Plantinga rejects a narrow form of
fideism. Faith, as I construe it, is identical with or close family kin of what Plantinga
means by "basic belief." I hope to pursue this connection another time.

1977), pp. 73, 90.

10. Consider, for example, the epistemological works of Christians such as William
Alston, Robert Audi, Alvin Plantinga, and Richard Swinburne.
11. The most damning analysis of religious consequentialism of which I know is in David Hume's *The Natural History of Religion*. Hume berates it as calculating, ignoble, and based on fear and lust. It makes a god of one's hedonic state and subordinates everything else to it, including God. Hume had in mind the lowest forms of consequentialism, though clearly there can be more noble forms. Still, the troubling principle of creaturely exaltation (whether of oneself, another individual, the nation, the species, the environment, etc.) seems to characterize all of its forms.


15. This paragraph might seem to reveal agatheism to be a form of consequentialism, but I think it does not. The good consequences of God existing are a reason for hoping that God exists, but they are not the right reason for being devoted to God. The end of religion is the appreciation and glorification of God by his creatures. To be sure, the Gospel says that an aim of God is the salvation of humankind, and that is why the Gospel is good news, but such salvation is something for humans to accept and be grateful for, not to be devoted to. It is God to whom we should be devoted— not because of the good that he can or has or will do for us, but simply because he is perfect goodness.

16. Agatheists are not hostile to natural theology, but they are concerned to show that the success or failure of natural theology to demonstrate or defend the existence of God is not the pivot upon which turns the rationality of religious devotion, except in the case of a conclusive proof or disproof of the existence of God.

17. It is the logic of this thesis, I think, that produced the sentiments in Amos 5:21-24, Micah 6:6-8, Matthew 25, I John 3:17-18, James 1:27 and 2:15, and other such biblical statements.

18. Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Immanuel Kant seem to be the pioneers of this position. See Rousseau's "Profession of Faith of the Savoyard Vicar," in Book IV of *Emile*, and Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*, Part I, Bk. II, Ch. II, Sec. V.

19. It is not uncommon for religious hope to be egocentrically motivated, but hope that there is a God need not be egocentrically motivated even when the hoper knows that she will benefit if her hope is true.

20. See Stewart Sutherland's discussion of this point in "Hope," pp. 198-202, cited above in note 6. Sutherland conceptualizes religious or metaphysical hope as "a moral vision of what might be," discusses differences between the religious hope for heaven and
the secular hope for utopia, and points out that the content of religious hope can serve as
"a basis for the critical evaluation of our world, rather than a flight from it."

21. The Natural History of Religion (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press,
Martin Buber's I and Thou (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970) and Paths in Utopia

22. This last point, as Sutherland explains, is a pivotal difference between the secular
understanding of utopia and the religious understanding of God's kingdom. See his

#194. Or see #427 in Blaise Pascal, Pensées, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (New York: Penguin

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