Prudential defenses of religious belief: Pascal and W. James

Having a prudential reason to do $x = a$ strong likelihood that doing $x$ will promote one’s interests, increase one’s happiness.

Having an evidential reason to believe = having evidence which makes it likely that $x$ is the case

Suppose that you will receive $1,000,000 if you sincerely believe that at this very moment, President Bush is juggling candy bars in the Oval Office. Then you have good prudential reason to believe that that’s what he’s doing, but you have no good evidential reasons to support such a belief.

Prudential arguments for becoming a theist claim there are good prudential reasons in support of believing in God.

‡ “Even if the belief is false, still, having it is good for you, so you should believe in God.”

Pascal’s “wager” argument:

You can choose to believe in God or not. If the former, you’re betting that God exists; if the latter, that he doesn’t exist. If you bet on God and there really is a God, then you win eternal happiness. If you bet on God and there really isn’t one, then, if you lose anything at all, at most it is a finite amount of temporal happiness (e.g. you miss some Sunday morning football games on T.V. that you really wanted to watch, but didn’t because you went to church instead). If you bet on no God and it turns out that there really is one, then you lose eternal happiness. If you bet on no God and there really isn’t one, all you’ve gained is a finite amount of temporal happiness. Given these possible payoffs and loses, it’s rational to bet on God and irrational to bet against Him, even if all of the evidence made it very unlikely that God exists. [Just as it’s rational to buy a lottery ticket for $1 where the odds of winning are only 1 in 1,000 but the payoff to the winner is, say, $5,000,000].

Three objections to Pascal’s argument:

i) “Pascal assumes, incorrectly, that you can believe in God just by deciding to, or by an act of will. But belief is not under the direct or immediate control of the will.”

Reply: All Pascal needs to assume is that belief is under our indirect control. (Analogy: Whether I keep my arm by my side or waive it in the air is something under my direct control; I can decide to raise it or lower it. Not so with blood pressure; it’s not under the direct control of your will. But if blood pressure medication is available, and it’s up to you whether or not you take, then whether your blood pressure is high or low is something that’s under your indirect control). We can influence what beliefs we are likely to have the future by decisions we make today about who we will socialize with, what TV shows and networks we will watch, what books we read, etc.

ii) Pascal’s argument assumes that if there is a God, He rewards only and all believers (that is, anyone who accepts traditional theism) with infinite heavenly bliss. That assumption is more “liberal” than orthodox Christian belief, according to which only
Christian theists receive heavenly rewards; Jewish, Moslem, and other non-Christian theists don’t. It is also less “liberal” than the view that if a just God exists, He rewards all and only morally virtuous people in proportion to their moral virtue, and He simply does not care about what theological convictions anyone holds. The objection is simply this: Pascal gives us absolutely no reason why we should accept his assumption, rather than either the more liberal one or the less liberal one.

iii) Isn’t it irrational to put prudential reasons ahead of evidential ones, when the two conflict? Isn’t it irrational to believe that Elvis is still alive (given the overwhelming evidence that he is dead), even if that belief gives you a lot of happiness?

William James’ defense of faith:

1. For at least some people, believing in God accords with/serve their “passional nature”; i.e. they are, in the long run, happier, better adjusted, etc. as a result of believing in God.
2. What’s more, for these people, the choice between the options of being a believer and being an unbeliever is “genuine” (i.e. “forced,” “living,” and “momentous”).
3. Whether or not there really is a God cannot be determined by our intellects. There will never be more/better evidential reasons in support of theism than atheism, or in support of atheism than theism.
4. “Our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot be decided on intellectual [evidential] grounds.”
5. Therefore, it is perfectly reasonable for the people mentioned in 1 to choose religious belief, rather than to suspend judgment on the question of whether such belief is true.

What is James arguing against? Answer: “evidentialism,” defined as the view that:

1) Fully rational people try not to let their passions influence their beliefs. They try to form their beliefs solely on the basis of evidence, and they try to avoid “wishful thinking.” If they see more evidence for P than not-P, then they believe P, even if they find it disagreeable to do so. And if they see no more evidence for one than the other, then they “suspend judgment” on the question of which is true.
2) Hence, it is reasonable to believe in God, only if there is a good argument or strong evidence that God exists. If faith is believing in God whether or not one has such evidence, then faith is unreasonable.

In effect, James is arguing that if religious faith makes you feel good, if it gives you a sense of purpose or meaning that you could not sustain without it, if it helps you cope with tragedy and misfortune, etc., then it’s not unreasonable for you to have it—even if can point to no good evidence that makes it probably true.

Some differences between Pascal’s and James’ arguments:

-- Their conclusions: Pascal concludes that everyone ought to believe in God.
James’ conclusion is that some people may believe in God.
-- The benefits of religious belief: for Pascal, the benefit (which is gained only if the belief is true) is otherworldly, namely, the salvation of one’s soul, or heavenly bliss, or something like that. For James, the benefit (which one enjoys whether or not the belief is true) is in this world, namely, increased happiness.
-- Pascal thinks that we should do what’s prudent and believe in God, even if the evidence is very strong (but not conclusive) that no God exists. James thinks that one may reasonably believe in God, but only if our intellect is stumped by the issue (i.e. finds that either there is no evidence for or against religious belief, or that the evidence is evenly balanced).

On the basis of this third difference, we might distinguish two different kinds of faith—
   i) “extreme” faith—believing x, even though one admits that it is more likely (given all the evidence) that x is false than that it’s true.
   ii) “moderate” faith—believing x, rather than suspending judgment, when there will never be more evidence for x than not-x, or not-x than x.

Pascal defends the reasonableness of “extreme” faith, while James only defends the reasonableness of “moderate” faith. Hence, James does not support the reasonableness of “faith” that Elvis is still alive (in hiding somewhere), because whether or not he’s still alive is a question that can and should be decided by our intellects on basis of evidential reasons.