Can We Learn to Believe in God?

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Let us weigh the gain and the loss in wagering that God is. Let us estimate these two chances. If you gain, you gain all; if you lose, you lose nothing. Wager, then, without hesitation that He is.

So runs Blaise Pascal's famous wager. His thought is simple: If there is a God, believing in him ensures an eternity of happiness, while denying him secures an eternity of suffering. If there is no God and you believe in him, the downside is relatively minimal. Even if the chance he exists is tiny, believing is the right bet.

This argument has produced few converts, as Pascal would not have been surprised to learn. He knew that people cannot change their beliefs at will. We can't muscle our mind into believing something we take to be false, not even when the upside is an eternity of happiness. Pascal's solution is that you start by pretending to believe: attend church, speak the prayers, adopt religious habits. If you walk and talk like a believer, eventually you'll come to think as one. He says, "This will naturally make you believe, and deaden your acuteness."

But many of us recoil at this suggestion. We don't want to lie to ourselves. Say there were a pill that would do the trick: Pop it in your mouth and you'll be a religious believer. Someone convinced by Pascal's argument — at least to the extent of thinking that believing is the best bet — might nonetheless refuse to take this pill. She might be repulsed by the thought of going behind her own back to acquire this belief.

Pascal seems to concede that *trying to believe* is a matter of wishful thinking, self-deception or self-manipulation. He thinks we should do it anyway. But I think our hope of becoming better people — whether in respect of religion, friendship or justice, or in any number of different ways — rests on the possibility that there is a more straightforward and less self-abasing way to try to believe.

Consider a thought experiment. Suppose you have a friend who doesn't get why people listen to music, read novels or eat fine food. He watches (what you consider) trashy TV and has no ambitions as regards career or romance. Since the person I have described is someone you consider a Philistine, I'll call him Phil. He is not depressed or irresponsible: Phil takes his job seriously (though he has deliberately chosen an undemanding one). He loves his friends and family. You don't doubt that he is happy with what he has, but you think he could be much happier, overall, than he is.

So you attempt to broaden his horizons. You take him to national parks and fancy restaurants; you introduce him to potential romantic partners. Phil views your efforts with amusement and affection rather than with irritation. Nonetheless, he is unmoved. He finds prestige TV boring and camping uncomfortable; he has no interest in marriage or child-raising; he doesn't see why one wouldn't just eat rice and beans. You get frustrated with him, and you say, "You are not even trying!"

What do you want from Phil? You are not proposing that he pretend to like these things, nor that he trick himself into thinking that hiking or romance is better than he takes it to be. Rather, you want him to try to believe them to be more valuable than he has currently has reason to, in order to *learn* their true value. When we try

to believe in this sense — with a view to learning what we aim to believe — it is a rational, transparent means of belief acquisition. I call it aspirational faith.

Like many protagonists of thought experiments, Phil is idiosyncratic. What is strange about Phil is that he seems to have transitioned from childhood to adulthood without a radical change in his tastes, hobbies or goals. For many of us, the teenage period sees the beginning of some of our lifelong passions: We start reading big novels, performing music, seeking romance, caring about our appearance, looking toward the prospect of a career. Lacking a complete grasp of the identity toward which she guides herself, the teenager must have faith in the person she's trying to become, and in what that person cares about. Otherwise she'll become trapped in childhood.

John Hughes's movie "The Breakfast Club" (1985) is a classic movie of its genre precisely because it captures this feature of the teenage experience. Five teenagers from different cliques ("a brain, an athlete, a basket case, a princess and a criminal") bond during enforced Saturday detention. Over the hours together, they discover a common humanity that transcends the social roles into which each had been slotted.

Having made themselves vulnerable to one another, they ask themselves, in the movie's climactic scene, whether they will acknowledge one another in school on Monday. Claire ("the princess") answers in the negative and is consequently accused by Bender ("the criminal") of being nothing more than what she initially seemed: "You just stick to the things that you know: shopping, nail polish, your father's BMW ...." Claire in turn, accuses Bender of being unwilling to face the facts. She says, "I'm telling the truth." The eventual romantic resolution of this dispute — the two characters kiss — is a cinematic way of signaling that the correct attitude to their future lies somewhere in the middle.

Claire is wrong to be so cynical: If she believes that their association was merely temporary or convenient, then what has happened between them is insignificant and each character is truly trapped in his or her pigeonhole. Consider this line from the New Yorker critic Pauline Kael's correspondingly cynical review: "The movie is about a bunch of stereotypes who complain that other people see them as stereotypes." Kael is not wrong that the characters are stereotypes. But the point of the movie is to give us a glimpse of them trying to be more than that.

Notice, however, that the antidote to cynicism cannot be Bender's naïve conviction that everything is different now. A person cannot, in a day, do the work needed to transcend years of internalized stereotyping. At the end of the movie, detention ends and the five teenagers part ways with a fragile, doubt-filled faith in the connections they have forged. They have tasted enough of the value of true friendship to know that they have not plumbed its depths and are therefore liable to ignore one another in the halls on Monday morning; their attitude toward the goods of friendship is not one of possession but one of aspiration.

Lacking the grounds to conclude that they will greet one another, they can nonetheless have aspirational faith — *try* to believe — that they will do so. The movie suggests that it is possible to see something in the prospect of stereotype-transcending friend-

ship without taking oneself to have seen all that there is to see. What keeps aspirational faith honest is its provisional character, the aspirant's recognition that she still has a long way to go.

The problem with Pascal's wager is that it is a wager, and so the stakes are fixed in advance. Betting is about winning some value you are already aware of, not learning that there is something new out there to be valued. If you set out to acquire beliefs without learning, you are cheating: gaining epistemic ground without doing epistemic work. By contrast, in the cases of aspirational faith, coming to believe that, e.g., we will still be friends on Monday, is part and parcel of a bigger project of learning to become a different kind of person. The project is intellectual, involving a change in beliefs, but it is not *only* intellectual — and its intellectual character is inseparable from its affective and motivational character.

Pascal may have been making a related point, to the effect that the mind does not have a monopoly on wisdom, when he famously proclaimed that "the heart has its reasons, which reason does not know." But that sentiment, however beautifully expressed, leaves the crucial questions unanswered. Because suppose that Pascal is right, and someone's heart has reasons that her reason does not know. Do things have to stay that way? Couldn't her reason learn those reasons? And wouldn't that, in turn, be her heart's opportunity to grow?

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