

## UNIT 2

# PROOFS FOR THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

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## 1. Theism, Atheism and Agnosticism

There are three major philosophical positions regarding the question whether God exists. **Theists** believe that God exists. **Atheists** believe that God does not exist. **Agnostics** suspend belief in God's existence or nonexistence and remain neutral on the question.


Two points should be clarified. First, the discussion concerns the question whether God, as understood in Judaism and in Christianity (sometimes we will speak of the Judeo-Christian understanding of God) exists. We will thus not be discussing the question whether, say, the gods of the Greek mythology exist. This is justified in part historically (the traditional philosophical debate concerned the question whether God, as understood by the Judeo-Christian religions, exists) and in part philosophically (as we will soon see the Judeo-Christian conception of God is philosophically rich enough to make the proofs for – as well as against – the existence of God feasible).


The second point of clarification concerns agnosticism. One sometimes meets the opinion that agnostics are “confused” or “don't know what they think”. To some extent this problem with understanding agnostics is aggravated by the fact that from a practical point of view the agnostics might be indistinguishable from the atheists – they will not go to church, they will not pray, etc., though they will also not actively teach that God surely does not exist. To help you understand the agnostic's position, you might consider some of your other beliefs. Try to answer the following questions:

- Washington, D.C. is the capital of the U.S.  yes  no  I don't know
- Ottawa is the capital of Canada.  yes  no  I don't know
- Ulan Bator is the capital of Burundi.  yes  no  I don't know
- A stork has flown over the Empire State Building on 20.04.1999.  yes  no  I don't know
- A carbon atom is in the exact middle of this page.  yes  no  I don't know

If you've answered sincerely, there are certainly some issues mentioned above on which you simply withhold judgment. I, for one, simply do not have any beliefs regarding the stork flying over the ES building on that date or ever. I also do not have beliefs about the kind of atom that is to be found in the exact middle of this page. In either case, I have no way of finding out about it. And in either case, the matter is simply irrelevant to my life.

The agnostics argue both points with regard to the issue of God's existence. All of the agnostics claim that we have no way of finding out about whether God exists or not. And some of them in addition claim that, contrary to appearances, the matter is irrelevant to our lives. – One already has to be a theist in order to believe the matter of God's existence to be relevant. But when one looks at the issue objectively, one will see – they claim – that the issue is not of great relevance.

 Do you agree with the agnostic's claim that we have no way of finding out about whether God exists or not? Why (not)?

 Do you agree with the agnostic's claim that the issue of God's existence is irrelevant to our lives? Why (not)?

## 2. Faith and Reason

There is a very old debate between those who hold that faith is not subject to rational consideration and those who believe that matters of faith can be evaluated rationally.

**Religious rationalists** believe that although faith is quite a unique phenomenon and that religious beliefs are quite different from other beliefs, nonetheless we can rationally inquire into religious beliefs. In particular, religious rationalists have sought to find logical proofs that God exists (we will look at some such proofs in Unit 2 and 4).

**Fideists** believe that faith has nothing to do with reason, it is a separate domain of spiritual life and matters of faith can never be subject to knowledge. We can believe in God but we can never *know* that God exists. In fact, fideists (among them, Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein) believe that the so-called proofs for the existence of God are quite pointless.

The distinction between fideism and religious rationalism is to be distinguished from the independent distinction between theism/atheism/agnosticism. Theists may be both fideists as well as rationalists.

### 2.1. St. Thomas Aquinas as a Religious Rationalist

St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) was a medieval philosopher and theologian. He urged a clear separation of faith from reason. He suggested that theology was to be concerned with matters of faith, while philosophy with matters of reason. The task of theology was to start with the belief that God exists and develop and clarify it. The task of philosophy was to start with other beliefs but to strive toward establishing that God exists. In contemporary terms, the task of philosophy was to justify or provide reasons for the belief that God exists.

Although Aquinas saw the tasks of philosophy to be opposite each other – he did not think that faith and reason were incompatible. Quite to the contrary, as one of the most prominent religious rationalists, he tried to establish that there is no contradiction between faith and reason. He argued that there cannot be any contradiction between the two because both the faculty of faith and the faculty of reason were given to us by God.

Although St. Thomas Aquinas was a religious rationalist and in fact he offered new proofs for the existence of God, which we will mention in a moment, he also thought that there are some truths of faith that are beyond rational understanding.

### 2.2. Kierkegaard as a Fideist

One of the most famous fideists is the Danish philosopher and theologian Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855). Kierkegaard believed that our capacity to have faith is the highest spiritual capacity that is over and above reason or, as he would put it, transcends reason. In fact, he believed that for that very reason (i.e. because faith transcends reason) that it is *arational*, i.e. it cannot be grasped by rational means, it is beyond reason. Note that to say that faith is arational is not to say that it is irrational.

Kierkegaard's notion of faith is very interesting and very peculiar at the same time. He believes only the (mentally) strongest among us are capable of having *real* faith, of trusting God *without question*. Faith requires that one have the courage and the strength to leap over the abyss, to do what seems absurd. To illustrate what faith involves, he uses the *Genesis* story of Abraham, who is for Kierkegaard the paradigmatic example of a faithful person. Kierkegaard offers a particularly striking interpretation of the story, which criticizes the more ordinary ways of understanding it. I've put up the fragment of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* as an optional reading if you are interested to pursue it.

### **2.3. The Working Assumption of Religious Rationalism**

In Units 2 and 3, we will be using religious rationalism as a working assumption. We will simply take it for granted that it is possible to use reason in religious matters.

When I say that we will take it for granted I do not mean to be saying that this is the only available position. To the contrary, fideism is a viable option. However, in order for us to understand the coming units, we need to adopt religious rationalism as an assumption – with the understanding that it might be wrong and with the understanding that you might ultimately not agree with it.

You must also understand that this assumption has consequences. In many discussions, in particular in the discussion concerned with the problem of evil (Unit 3), one sometimes hears the theist respond that we can never know God's mind and so we can never know why he allows evil. Now this response is actually quite peculiar from a methodological point of view (if one accepts religious rationalism). For, if the theist is right in believing that God exists, then what she says in this response is just true. We can never know God's mind, we cannot know God's reasons in allowing evil. But at the same time, if one accepts religious rationalism, then this response is not available as a legitimate response. For assuming religious rationalism is tantamount to committing oneself to using our, granted, limited resources and trying as best as we can to find reasons that there are for allowing evil.

Indeed, the position of religious rationalism is a very courageous position to take by the theist. To think that one can use reason in religious matters is to admit the possibility that, at the end of the day, the verdict of reason will be against faith. St. Thomas Aquinas had faith that this will not be so, as do many religious rationalists.

### 3. Four Kinds of Proofs for the Existence of God

We can distinguish kinds of proofs relying on at least two criteria: the first concerns the types of premises that are used, the second concerns the types of conclusions that are reached.

#### 3.1. A Priori and A Posteriori Proofs

With respect to the first criterion, we can distinguish a posteriori and a priori proofs. **A priori proofs** rely only on a priori premises. **A posteriori proofs** rely on some a posteriori premises. A statement is **a priori** if its truth or falsehood can be determined relying solely on reason without relying on experience. A statement is **a posteriori** if its truth or falsehood can be determined relying (at least in part) on experience. The distinction is best illustrated by the following pair of statements:

- (1) All contemporary Hattiesburg bachelors are handsome.
- (2) All contemporary Hattiesburg bachelors are unmarried.

How would we find out whether (1) is true? Well, we would have to consult experience. We would first gather a list of all bachelors living in Hattiesburg now. We would then need to knock at each one's door, inspect him somehow and judge: Is he handsome, or not? We would then reach a conclusion. We would reach the conclusion by consulting experience, i.e. the statement (1) is a posteriori.

Consider (2). How would we find out whether contemporary Hattiesburg bachelors are unmarried? On the face of things, it might appear that we should follow the same procedure. We would first gather a list of all bachelors living in Hattiesburg now. We would then need to knock at each one's door, inspect him and judge: Is he married or not? . . . But unlike in the previous case, you probably know the answer to that question already, don't you? Surely, each and every bachelor (living in Hattiesburg or wherever, living now or whenever) is not married, for this is just what it means to be a bachelor – to be unmarried. In other words, we can establish the truth of (2) by reason alone, just by inspecting the concepts of a bachelor and of being unmarried. We do not need to consult experience in ascertaining the truth or falsehood of a statement like (2). Indeed, (2) is an a priori statement.

Most of the claims of empirical sciences are a posteriori, most of the claims of mathematics, logic and philosophy are a priori.

#### 3.2. Epistemic and Pragmatic Proofs

In addition to the distinction between a priori and a posteriori proofs, proofs for the existence of God can be divided according to a different criterion, viz. the type of conclusion that is proved. With respect to this criterion, one can distinguish epistemic and pragmatic proofs. The conclusion of an **epistemic proof** for the existence of God is that the proposition "God exists" is true. In other words, an epistemic proof purports to show that God exists. The conclusion of a **pragmatic proof** for the existence of God is that it is useful or good to believe the proposition "God exists" to be true. In other words, a pragmatic proof purports to show that we should believe that God exists. A pragmatic proof falls short of showing that God exists.

### 3.3. Cross-Classification

Since the two criteria of types of premises used and of the type of conclusion reached are independent of each other, we can crisscross them and obtain a fourfold classification of proofs for the existence of God, which we can summarize in the following table:

	Epistemic	Pragmatic
A Priori	A priori epistemic proofs (e.g. St. Anselm's Ontological Proof)	A priori pragmatic proofs (e.g. Pascal's Wager)
A Posteriori	A posteriori epistemic proofs (e.g. St. Thomas Aquinas' Five Ways)	A posteriori pragmatic proofs

### 3.4. The Power of Logical Proofs

Note that we are talking about “proofs” in the logical sense of the term, which we mentioned in Unit 1. Frequently, when people use the phrase “I have proof that God exists”, what they mean is that they have witnessed some event that, according to them, is good or indisputable evidence that God exists. There usually are other people who challenge their interpretation of such an event. In the case of logical proofs, on the other hand, as long as everyone is agreed that the proof is indeed correct (i.e. that all the steps are valid) and as long as everyone agrees that the premises are true then they *must* agree that the conclusion is true. The challenge that the theist philosophers have been undertaking is to find such proofs that would be correct but would start from premises that even an atheist, not to mention an agnostic, could accept. You may be skeptical whether it is possible to find such proofs, but while there are problems and discussions concerning each and every proof that has been proposed, some of those proofs are really quite remarkable and certainly do appear to come very close to their task. The proofs that we will be looking at are old. But you should know that there are contemporary theist philosophers who use the tools of modern logic to try to find logically valid and sound proofs for the existence of God.

#### Exercise “A Priori and A Posteriori”

For each of the statements, decide whether it is a priori or a posteriori. In case of a priori statements, decide whether it is true or false.

- (a) All bachelors have a beard.
- (b) Some bachelors are obnoxious.
- (c) There is a bachelor who has a beautiful and smart wife.
- (d) No bachelors have a wife.

## 4. Definition of God

In all of the proofs, a certain understanding of the nature of God is accepted. It is common to Judaism and Christianity. In addition, we will need to understand that the mere definition of God does not imply theism.

### 4.1. Judeo-Christian Definition of God

It is widely accepted by the Judeo-Christian philosophers and theologians that God is to be defined as the omnibenevolent, omnipotent and omniscient being. To say that God is **omnibenevolent** is the same as saying that God is all-good or infinitely good. To say that God is **omnipotent** is the same as saying that God is all-powerful or infinitely powerful. To say that God is **omniscient** is to say that God is all-knowing or knows everything.

Sometimes people add that God is omnipresent, though there are some questions as to how exactly to understand this. There are some, so-called pantheists, who believe that God is the world and so that God is everywhere. But there are some who object to that and say that when we eat a carrot we are not eating God, not even a part of Him. They might understand omnipresence differently, as the God's power to be everywhere and in particular to hear everyone, but in such a case, omnipresence is already covered by omnipotence. An omnipotent being surely has the power to be everywhere and in particular to listen to everyone. So, omnipresence is either a controversial feature of God (if understood as pantheists understand it) or, if understood uncontroversially, it is already covered by omnipotence.

We will thus stick with the three essential characteristics of God: omnibenevolence, omnipotence and omniscience.

Although, as I mentioned, such a definition of God is widely accepted, this is not to say that there are no controversies regarding it. In particular, there are quite a few discussions regarding the issue of what omnipotence means.

### 4.2. The Logical Significance of the Judeo-Christian Definition of God

Aside from the fact that the Judeo-Christian concept of God has been historically prominent, it is also quite special from a logical point of view. This will become clearer when we talk about the Ontological Argument. For now, let me only mention that it is really because the Judeo-Christian concept of God is logically so rich that it has made the proofs for the existence of God at all feasible. By contrast, the Greek concept of god(s) (from the Greek Mythology) is, logically speaking, far less powerful and most of the proofs for existence of the Judeo-Christian God would not work for the Greek gods.

Remaining at this very abstract level, I should add that the Judeo-Christian concept of God is not the only concept of deity that is logically so rich. The Eastern concepts have some comparable features that could make the application of logical tools possible.

### 4.3. Definition and Existence

To agree that God is the omnibenevolent, omnipotent and omniscient being is not yet to agree that God exists. In general, to accept a definition is not yet to accept that anything that exemplifies the definition exists. Consider the following examples:

Pegasus =<sub>df</sub> winged horse  
alien life form =<sub>df</sub> life form existing in space outside of Earth and its atmosphere  
Athena =<sub>df</sub> the goddess of wisdom, war, the arts, industry, justice and skill

We can agree with each of the definitions but differ with respect to the question whether anything actually exemplifies the definitions. For example, we can agree that Pegasus is a winged horse but claim that there are no winged horses (i.e. Pegasus does not exist). We can agree Athena is the goddess of wisdom etc. but claim that Athena does not exist. Likewise for alien life forms. Definitions do not imply claims about existence.

It is thus possible for an atheist to accept the definition of God as an omnibenevolent, omnipotent and omniscient being and claim that God does not exist. The theist then will have to do some further proof work to convince the atheist that God, so defined, does too exist.

## 5. Aquinas' Five Ways

St. Thomas Aquinas, whom we have already mentioned as the prominent representative of religious rationalism, has proposed five a posteriori proofs for the existence of God. (They are thus a posteriori epistemic proofs.) Many of those proofs make essential use of Aristotelian metaphysics, which is why we will not be looking at them in depth. I will present a reconstruction of one of them in more detail below and we will present the five of them in a sketchy way. All of the proofs rely on some facts about the world:

- the First Way relies on there being motion
- the Second Way relies on there being causes
- the Third Way relies on there being contingent beings
- the Fourth Way relies on there being gradations in perfection
- the Fifth Way relies on there being an order and harmony in the universe

In the First Way, Aquinas uses Aristotelian metaphysics to argued that since there is motion there must be a prime mover, whom we understand to be God. In the Second Way, which we will discuss in more detail below, he argues that since there are causes there must be a First Cause, which we understand to be God. In the Third Way, he argues that the existence of contingent beings<sup>1</sup> requires that there be a necessary being, whom we understand to be God. In the Fourth Way, he argues (referring to the teacher of Aristotle, Plato) that since real objects exhibit various properties in various degrees (e.g. people are more or less good, just, etc.) there must be a being that has those properties in the highest degree. In the Fifth Way, which is otherwise known as the Teleological Argument or the Design Argument, Aquinas argues that the existing harmony and perfection in the world implies that it has been designed by an

<sup>1</sup> A contingent being is a being that is possible but not necessary.

infinitely intelligent being, whom we understand to be God. You should not pretend to see how the conclusions follow from the premises given just this brief descriptions. But let us look at Aquinas' Second Way in some more detail to get some sense of the way that the proofs work and of some of the problems with them.

### **5.1. The Second Way in Prose**

Aquinas begins with the observation that things cause other things in the world. He actually establishes the thought that there are series (chains) of causes, by arguing that nothing can cause itself. (He believes that nothing can cause itself on the ground that were something to cause itself, it would have to be prior to itself, but nothing can be prior to itself, so also nothing can cause itself.) If a thing is not caused by itself, it must be caused by another thing: a prior thing in the chain of causes. So, causes come in series.

Once it is established that causes come in series, the question that arises is whether the series continues into infinity or whether it is finite and has a beginning. In other words, the question is whether there is a cause that is not itself caused: the First Cause. A theist, and on his behalf Aquinas, wants to establish that there must be a First Cause, which Aquinas will claim everyone understands to be God. In other words, Aquinas wants to claim that we cannot believe that the series of actual causes is infinite, that it has no beginning, that there is no First Cause. He will try to show that the supposition that the series of actual causes has no beginning leads one into difficulty, in fact, it leads one to contradict obvious facts.

Aquinas invites us to suppose that the series of actual causes is infinite, that it has no beginning. The supposition will lead to absurdity given only two facts, both of which Aquinas thinks are quite innocent and obvious. The first fact concerns our understanding of causal series. It is true for all series of causes, that a first cause in the series causes intermediary causes which in turn cause further (last) causes. This (he thinks) is just a plain fact about causal series. The second fact concerns the nature of causation: effects would not occur were their causes not to occur. From these two general facts and our supposition that the actual series of causes is infinite, Aquinas suggests, it follows that there would be no intermediary causes now. Here is why. To say that the series is infinite is to say that it has no first cause. But we know (the first fact) that the first cause causes intermediary causes. So, we also know (if we take into account the second fact) that were the first cause not to occur, its effects (i.e. the intermediary causes) would not occur either. Our supposition that there is no first cause thus seems to force us to conclude that there would be no intermediary causes and in fact no later causes. And yet, we all know very well that things cause other things all the time. In other words, Aquinas shows us that we are led to an absurd thought (that there are no intermediary causes while we all know that there are intermediary causes) if we suppose that the series of actual causes is infinite, that there is no First Cause. The only reasonable thing is to reject the thought that is responsible for the trouble, the thought that the series of causes is infinite.

To reject the thought that the series of causes is infinite is to accept that there is a First Cause, and that, Aquinas urges, is to have proven that God (the First Cause, the Creator of everything else) exists.

## 5.2. A Schematization of the Second Way

The basic structure of the argument (note that the numbers of the steps of the argument do not correspond to the numbers in the book).

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| 1. Things cause other things in the world.        | (Premise: empirically true)                |
| 2. Nothing can cause itself                       | (established independently, argument A)    |
| 3. Causes come in series                          | (1, 2)                                     |
| 4. Causal series can be either finite or infinite | (Premise: necessarily true)                |
| 5. No infinite causal series exist                | (established independently, argument B)    |
| 6. Series of causes must be finite.               | (4, 5)                                     |
| 7. There is a First Cause                         | (6)  |
| 8. God is the First Cause                         | (Premise: follows from the concept of God) |
| Therefore, God exists.                            | (7, 8)                                     |

### Argument A: Nothing can cause itself (the *reductio* version)

- |                                      |   |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| A.1. Causes are prior to effects.    | (Premise)   |
| A.2. Nothing can be prior to itself. | (Premise)   |
| A.3.1. Something can cause itself    | Supposition ( <i>reductio</i> )                   |
| A.3.2. Something is prior to itself  | (3.1), (1)  |
| A.3.3. Contradiction                 | (3.2), (2)  |
| A.4. Nothing can cause itself.       | (rejection of A.3.1 as it leads to contradiction) |

### Argument B: There are no infinite causal series (the *reductio* version)

B.1. In all causal series, the first thing causes the intermediaries, which cause the last thing.	(Premise)
B.2. Effects do not occur without causes.	(Premise)
B.3. If there is no first cause, there will be no intermediary causes and no last causes.	(B.1), (B.2)
B.3.1. Suppose: There are infinite causal series	Supposition ( <i>reductio</i> )
B.3.2. There is no first cause	(B.3.1)
B.3.3. There are no intermediary causes	(B.3.2), (B.2)
B.3.4. There are intermediary causes	From (1) of main proof
B.3.5. Contradiction	(B.3.3), (B.3.4)
B.4. There are no infinite causal series	(rejection of B.3.1 as it leads to contradiction)

### 5.3. Some Criticisms of the Second Way

**Objection 1.** One problem with the argument is that it does not show that there is only one first cause. To say that the series of causes cannot be infinite is to say that there is *at least one* beginning, but it is quite conceivable that the series (or, better, tree) of causes has more than one beginning. After all we start with the commonsense observation that things cause other things. My dropping a chalk will cause the chalk to fall, which in turn might cause the chalk to break to pieces, etc. But it is quite conceivable (nothing in the argument prevents us from thinking) that there are more than one series of causes. (I may be dropping a chalk in one room causing it to break, but quite independently other teachers may be dropping their chinks in other rooms causing them to break. It would be quite extraordinary to think that all those events form *one* causal series. If the proof works on the other counts it would establish at most that those causal series must *each* have a beginning, its own first cause. But this conclusion is quite compatible with there being a plurality of deities each of which is the first cause of a causal series. This is a problem for someone like Aquinas who takes this argument to prove the existence of the Judeo-Christian God.

The theist might respond here by asking what explains (and so has caused – in some sense of ‘cause’) the very causal order (even if it has multiple beginnings), and argue that this is where we need to postulate the existence of God.

**Objection 2.** Moreover, the argument does not show that the first cause has the essential characteristics of the Judeo-Christian God: omnipotence, omnibenevolence and omniscience. It could thus be thought to be prove that some deity exists but not necessarily the Judeo-Christian God. (In fact, the argument is an adaptation of an argument by the Greek philosopher Aristotle.)

**Objection 3.** Another problem concerns the fact that Aquinas does not actually prove that it is absurd to think that the chain of causes is infinite. The first fact he considers to be important (B.1) is a fact about finite series, not about infinite series. It should be put more aptly thus:

(B.1)<sub>fin</sub> In all finite causal series, the first thing causes the intermediaries, which cause the last thing.

The corresponding fact for infinite series would have to be stated very differently:

(B.1)<sub>inf</sub> In all infinite series, the “first-considered” cause  $n$  causes the “intermediary” cause  $n+1$ , which in turn causes the “last-considered” cause  $n+2$ .

Note that the “first-considered” cause is not the first cause in the series (it could not be for infinite series do not have first causes). The cause is only “first” relative to our consideration: we arbitrarily single it out.

Since Aquinas asks us to imagine that the actual series of causes is infinite (B.3.1), he must operate with truths that hold for infinite series of causes not with truths that hold for finite ones. But if you go through the argument once again you will see that the trouble-making thought (that there would be no intermediary causes (B.3.4)) follows only if we work with (B.1)<sub>fin</sub>. Here is the explanation in some more detail:

Recall the crucial line of thought in the original argument: Aquinas argues that since the series of causes is infinite, there is no first cause, but then (from the two premises (B.2), (B.3.2)) it follows that there would not be intermediary causes, and so nothing at all. The recognition that (B.1)<sub>inf</sub> rather than (B.2)<sub>fin</sub> holds for infinite series introduces the following change: From the fact that the series of causes is infinite we can indeed conclude that there is no first cause. Now, however, we cannot conclude that there would be no intermediary causes. We could only conclude it if there were no “first-considered” cause  $n$ . But the supposition that the series of causes is infinite does not tell us that there is no “first-considered” cause  $n$ , it only tells us that there is no (absolute) first cause of the series. Thus, the argument breaks down.

## 6. Pascal's Pragmatic Argument for the Existence of God

Rather than arguing that God exists, Pascal argues that we *should believe* (that we are better off believing) that God exists.

His argument is pragmatic in the sense that he argues what it is useful for us to *do* (here: believe). The pragmatic argument establishes the pragmatic value (it being worthwhile) rather than the epistemic value (the truth) of the claim that God exists. Aquinas' arguments, on the other hand, are epistemic: they aim to establish the truth of the claim that God exists.

### 6.1. An Example of a Pragmatic Argument

Sam occasionally enjoys a beer: his having the beer is worth +2 (units of pleasure), his not having it is worth -2. He is trying to decide whether to go to a bar and have a beer with a friend. There is only one bar in town and he knows from experience that there is a 50/50 chance that he will meet Bubba. Bubba has the peculiar influence on Sam: when Sam meets Bubba he drinks by far too much (at least 10 beers). As a result, he suffers from horrendous hangover the next day. Sam takes hangovers particularly badly: -50 (of the same units of pleasure). What is Sam to do?

We can answer by constructing the following table. We begin by listing the choices that Sam has. Then we fill in the two ways that the world can turn out to be (we do not know which way will be realized):

The world: Sam's choices:	Bubba is in the bar.	Bubba is not in the bar.	expected payoffs:
Go to the bar	(a)	(b)	
Don't go to the bar	(c)	(d)	

We thus have four possible scenarios. Let's consider them in turn (and you plug in the numbers). Scenario (a). Sam will go to the bar and will meet Bubba. This means that he will drink at least ten beers, which will be fun because he likes beer. In fact, we can calculate how much fun it will be:  $10 \cdot 2 = 20$  units of pleasure. However, Sam will also suffer a terrible hangover, which will substantially decrease the amount of fun this scenario will be:  $20 - 50 = -30$ .

Scenario (b). Sam will go to the bar but will not meet Bubba. Sam will have his beer, which will give him +2 units of pleasure.

Scenario (c) and (d). Sam will not go to the bar, which will mean that he misses his beer pleasure. The scenarios will cost him -2 units of pleasure. Note that since he will not meet Bubba if he does not go to bar, it does not matter in these cases whether Bubba is or is not in the bar.

Now that we have all the numbers filled in, we need to proceed to the final calculation – the summing of the expected pleasure returns in the rows. We want to know whether it is better for

Sam to go to the bar (how many units of pleasure can he expect if he goes) or not to go to the bar (how many units of pleasure can he expect if he does not go). Carry out the calculation above. The greater the number in the last column, the better the choice. If you carried out the calculation correctly, you should have provided a pragmatic argument that it is better for Sam not to go to the bar – it is the lesser of two evils for  $-4$  is greater than  $-28$ :

Sam's choices: \ The world:	Bubba is in the bar.	Bubba is not in the bar.	expected payoffs:
Go to the bar	$10 \cdot 2 - 50 = -30$	+2	$-30 + 2 = -28$
Don't go to the bar	-2	-2	$-2 - 2 = -4$

The calculation you have seen is a simplified calculation of the sort advocated by formal decision theory. In formal decision theory one also assigns probabilities to the ways in which the world could be and then weighs the so-called utility (pleasure) by those probabilities. However, for our purposes the simplified version of the calculation will be sufficient.

## 6.2. Pascal's Pragmatic Argument for the Existence of God

Pascal wants to decide whether to believe in God or not. (He is trying to decide what to *do*.) He enters the decision process without knowing whether God exists or not (he gave up hope that God's existence or non-existence can be proven by epistemic arguments). So he needs to consider two possible ways for the *world* to be: either that God exists or that God does not exist. There are two possible *choices*: to believe that God exists (which involves not just the mere belief but also appropriate conduct) and not to believe that God exists.

Choices: \ The world:	God exists	God does not exist	expected payoffs:
Believe	(a)	(b)	
Don't believe	(c)	(d)	

What Pascal proceeds to do is to evaluate each course of action against each of ways the world could be and see what kind of value it would yield.

Scenario (a). If God exists and we choose to believe that God exists, not only would we be right (which might be quite satisfying, let's say 2 units of pleasure) but we would also go to heaven (remember that we are assuming that we conduct ourselves appropriately). How many units of pleasure should we assign to being in heaven? Well, let us be somewhat conservative and say that one day spent in heaven is worth 1 unit of pleasure. How many days will be spent in heaven? Eternity, i.e. infinitely many. This only means that being in heaven is worth an infinite number

of units of pleasure! Of course, we should also not forget that there are some costs to the belief in God – we will be refraining from all the forbidden worldly temptations. But even if we assume that those temptations cost us 1.000.000 units of pleasure, this suffering will still be “swallowed” by the infinite pleasure that being in heaven will give us. All of this holds on the assumption that God exists, of course.

Scenario (b). If God does not exist and we choose to believe that God exists, then we suffer some cost in that we are wrong (by parity, let’s say  $-2$  units of pleasure). In addition, we have refrained from all the forbidden worldly temptations, which now costs us 1.000.000 units of pleasure. In this scenario, we thus lose  $-1.000.002$  units of pleasure.

Scenario (c). If God exists and we choose *not* to believe that God exists, not only would we be wrong ( $-2$  units of pleasure) but we would also go to hell. How many units of pleasure should we assign to being in hell? Again, if we are conservative and assume that one day spent in hell is worth  $-1$  unit of pleasure, then we end up with  $-\infty$ . The calculation will not be shaken by the fact that we can add the pleasure of following all worldly temptations:  $-\infty + 1.000.000$  will still yield  $-\infty$ .

Scenario (d). If God does not exist and we choose not to believe that God exists, then we have been right ( $+2$  units of pleasure). In addition, we have followed all the forbidden worldly temptations, which has given us 1.000.000 units of pleasure. In this scenario, we thus gain 1.000.002 units of pleasure.

If we now fill in the numbers and calculate the expected payoffs, the choice will be clear: It is better to believe that God exists! (Note that the conclusion is not that God exists.)

The world: Choices:	God exists	God does not exist	expected payoffs:
Believe	$+\infty - 1.000.000 + 2 =$ $+\infty$	$-2 - 1.000.000 =$ $-1.000.002$	$+\infty$
Don't believe	$-\infty + 1.000.000 - 2 =$ $-\infty$	$+2 + 1.000.000 =$ $+1.000.002$	$-\infty$

### 6.3. Objection 1: Indeterminate Units of Pleasure

Consider the following objection: “This argument does not work because there is no principled way to assign units of pleasure. How are we to compare drinking beer and spending a day in heaven or hell?”

There is something right and something wrong in this objection. It is certainly right to point out that the assignment of pleasure units is quite problematic. However, it is wrong to treat this as a weakness in Pascal’s argument. We have been, of course, using arbitrary values. However, the values that really matter for the argument depend not on how much pleasure is assigned to a particular item but rather on the fact that heaven and hell are for ever. The infinite pleasure (and suffering), which decides the argument, depends not on our arbitrary assignment of pleasure units but on the fact that the number of days in heaven (and hell) is infinite.

This means that no matter what we would add to the calculation, this result will not change.

#### 6.4. Objection 2: Will to Believe

A more problematic objection to Pascal's argument notes that the argument is, as it were, out of place. The pragmatic calculations of the sort we have seen above usually concern choices of *actions*, of things we have in our power to *do*. Sam has a choice of whether to go to the bar or not to go to the bar. But beliefs are not actions and we do not have a choice about beliefs. When we look out of the window on a sunny day, we all believe that it is sunny outside, but it is not as if we choose to so believe. We could not believe that it is rainy when it is sunny. Beliefs are just not up to us. We may have all the reasons in the world to believe that it is snowing, but we just won't believe that it is unless we find ourselves in the appropriate situation. Likewise for other beliefs.

Suppose that an atheist is confronted with Pascal's argument. She is convinced that it would be better for her to believe in God. But she does not. She just does not. She wishes she were a believer but she just stares into the vast open sky and thinks to herself "Nope, unfortunately, there is nothing there."

Pascal can admit here that the argument in itself has no power to instill the belief in God in a person. But, he may argue, that this is true for any kind of argument. The epistemic proofs for the existence of God (like Aquinas' proofs) likewise have no power of producing the belief in God. The only thing that they do (if successful) is to justify such a belief, i.e. to show that it is rational to hold the belief in God. And this is also accomplished by the pragmatic argument.

Pascal was quite taken by the objection. He argued, however, that what we should do is to start acting like we believe in God (forgo temptations, follow the Christian ethics, go to church, etc.) and hope that in the course of our so acting, the belief that God exists will, one day, come to us.

#### 7. Facts about the Dialectic

When an argument for some conclusion is unsuccessful, this does not mean that the conclusion is false. It only means that this argument failed to establish its truth. On the other hand, when a deductive argument for some conclusion is both valid and sound then the conclusion has been proven to be true.