A Moral Reason to Be a Mere Theist: Improving the Practical Argument

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Abstract: This paper is an attempt to improve the practical argument for beliefs in God. Some theists, most famously Kant and William James, called our attention to a particular set of beliefs, the Jamesian-type beliefs, which are justified by virtue of their practical significance, and these theists tried to justify theistic beliefs on the exact same ground. I argue, contra the Jamesian tradition, that theistic beliefs are different from the Jamesian-type beliefs and thus cannot be justified on the same ground. I also argue that the practical argument, as it stands, faces a problem of self-defeat. I then construct a new practical argument that avoids both problems. According to this new argument, theistic beliefs are rational to accept because such beliefs best supply us with motivation strong enough to carry out demanding moral tasks.

Keywords: the practical argument, William James, Kant, moral motivation

"Sometimes the things that may or may not be true are the things a man needs to believe in the most. That people are basically good; that honor, courage, and virtue mean everything … that good always triumphs over evil ..."

From *Secondhand Lions*

I. Introduction

Some theists, most famously Kant and William James, try to justify theistic beliefs through a practical argument. They point to a set of beliefs (call them *Jamesian-type beliefs*) that seem to lack sufficient evidential support but nevertheless seem rational to have because of their practical significance, and argue that theistic beliefs resemble these Jamesian-type beliefs in their practical significance and thus can be justified on the exact same ground. This paper revisits Kant's classic version of the practical argument. After examining some existing challenges to this argument and

various attempts to meet them, the paper argues that this classic practical argument faces yet two further challenges, which have not received much discussion in the literature. The paper then constructs a new practical argument that avoids these challenges.

Two issues need to be clarified at the beginning. Philosophers usually distinguish between epistemic and pragmatic (or practical) reasons. Some philosophers (e.g. Parfit 2001; Olson 2004; Hieronymi 2005; Piller 2006) recently argue that practical reasons are "the wrong kind of reasons" for belief: the right kind of reasons for believing *p* should be epistemic reasons, reasons that bear on whether the object of the belief, *p*, is true; what practical reasons bear on is whether it is beneficial to be in the state of believing *p*. Thus, practical reasons are "the wrong kind of reasons" for believing *p*. It remains a matter of dispute whether reasons for being in a certain believing-state are indeed the wrong kind of reasons for the belief itself.[1] However, even if they are, proponents of the practical argument have a ready answer to this wrong-kind-of-reason objection. For many theists (e.g. Pascal, in *Pensées* Section III note 233), faith is a choice, not merely a belief. The most critical step on the journey of faith is to choose to put oneself in a position to seek God; once one is in a position of seeking God, the believing will come. Thus, the reasons one should seek first and foremost are reasons such as whether one should start to go to church and whether one should continue to pray. These are the critical decisions on the journey of faith, which is inevitably filled with a great deal of doubts. Consequently, the justification that the practical argument is supposed to provide is, first and foremost, a justification for seeking to enter a believing-state – that is, for accepting God.[2] For this reason, the challenges that the

[1] For example, Mark Schroeder (2012) provides an argument for why "state-given" reasons like practical reasons are not necessarily the wrong kind of reasons for belief.

[2] The wrong-kind-of-reason objection presents a more serious challenge to those who intend the practical argument to provide something stronger – a justification for believing God.

current paper focuses on are not challenges like the wrong-kind-of-reason objection, but challenges to the rationality of *accepting* theism – that is, challenges to the rationality of seeking to enter a state of believing. This, of course, is not to say epistemic considerations do not impose any constraints on what to accept – Section IV will discuss some of these epistemic constraints.

Second, the notion of "theism" also needs some clarification. The kind of theism that is defended here, which I call "mere theism", is thinner than traditional theism. Mere theism invokes only a thin notion of God – God is a transcendent being and part of God's nature is being perfectly morally good (part of this perfect goodness means wanting what is good for sentient beings such as us). According to mere theism, to believe in God is to believe in the existence of a transcendent being, part of whose transcendence is being morally good. Thus, mere theism is different from other thick theistic systems that often ascribe to God additional attributes like omniscience and omnipotence.

II. A Classic Practical Argument for Traditional Theism

Classic practical arguments often begin with types of cases in which it seems rational to accept something without sufficient evidence. Here is an often used example.

> *Mountain Climber*: a mountain climber finds himself faced with a chasm on the only route home – he has to jump across it to survive. He has never made such a jump before, and has no idea whether he can make it. He will be much more likely to make it if he firmly believes that he will. It seems rational for him to make himself believe that he will make the jump.

Here is another example from William James (with a feminist twist).

> *Confident Courter*: A woman likes a man but has no idea whether he will also like her. Standing there idly will not secure his affections. If, however, she firmly believes that he will

like her and makes her move accordingly, she will more likely win his favor. It seems rational for her to come to believe that he will like her.

In both cases, the belief in question lacks sufficient evidential support; but it still seems rational to enter the state of believing – the belief will increase the mountain climber's chance of survival and the courter's chance to find love, and surviving or finding love is significant to them.

Based on cases like these, arguments are made for traditional theism. Here is roughly how these arguments usually go: we lack sufficient evidence for the existence of God; but believing God's existence makes us more likely to gain something of great practical significance; therefore, just as it is rational for the climber to enter the state of believing that he will make the jump and the courter to enter the state of believing that her target will like her, it is also rational to enter the state of believing that God exists.

It is not always clear what the practical significance is that best justifies accepting God. James, for example, is vague about it in *The Will to Believe*: he merely refers to it as "a certain vital good" (1979, 30). Kant, on the other hand, is more explicit. For this reason, I will focus on Kant's version of the practical argument. Here is a reconstruction of Kant's classic argument by Robert M. Adams[3]:

(1) It would be demoralizing not to believe there is a moral order of the universe, for then we would have to regard it as very likely that the history of the universe will not be good on the whole, no matter what we do.

[3] Adams's original reconstruction contains only (1) to (5); I added (6) to complete the argument for the rationality of accepting theism. Following this interpretation of Kant, Zagzebski (1987) offers a similar argument in which she argues that moral knowledge, in face of the threat of moral skepticism, requires a belief in God. It should be noted that some philosophers take Kant's argument more as an effort to justify morality than an effort to justify theism – thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this journal for pointing this out.

(2) Demoralization is morally undesirable.

(3) Therefore, there is a moral advantage in believing that there is a moral order of the universe.

(4) Theism provides the most adequate theory of a moral order of the universe.

(5) Therefore, there is a moral advantage in accepting theism. (*The practical justification*)

(6) Therefore, it is rational to accept theism. (1987, 151)

Premise (1), (2), and (4) require some explanation. What Kant means by "a moral order of the universe" is the *harmony of happiness and virtue* (HHV) – that is, the existence of a world in which happiness exists in direct proportion to virtue, or, in more familiar words, virtuous action is rewarded by happiness (Adams 1987, 156; Hare 1996, 71-74; Chignell 2007, 355). Although Kant is famous for repudiating the idea that concerns for happiness should be the primary motivation for moral action, he believes that such concerns are real and powerful motivation for human beings – without believing that moral action will be rewarded by happiness, human beings will be demoralized.

There are at least two interpretations of demoralization: one is *having a weaker motivation to act morally*; the other is *having a lower chance of being successfully motivated to act morally*. I think demoralization should be understood in the second way: if one just has a weaker motivation but never fails to act morally, it is unclear why demoralization is practically significant. We face discouragement all the time. If such discouragement is not strong enough to actually thwart moral action, we do not *fail to act morally*, which I believe is what the practical argument takes to be "morally undesirable".

Premise (4) then tells us that the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent God makes it most likely that our moral effort will be rewarded by happiness.

Therefore, since belief in God gives us a significant moral advantage – namely, avoiding demoralization, we have a good practical justification for accepting traditional theism.

III. Challenges to the Premises

Various premises of this practical argument have been challenged. The first premise is particularly worrisome: Why is not believing in HHV demoralizing? To see the problem, we need first to better understand what HHV means.

According to John Hare (1996), there are two ways to interpret HHV. The first interpretation is that there exists a possible world in which everyone is virtuous and everyone is happy, and such a world is achievable through our moral effort. The second interpretation is that there exists a system in the actual world according to which virtue will be rewarded by happiness. An important difference between these two interpretations is that the second, unlike the first, does not assume the possible virtue of *other* agents – it simply says that "my virtue will be rewarded *whether everyone else is virtuous or not*." (Hare 1996, 85, original emphasis)

On either interpretation, the argument faces a problem. If HHV is understood as the possibility of an ideal world in which everyone is happy and virtuous, it is unclear why not believing in this possibility would demoralize us. I can be motivated to act virtuously as long as my virtuous action actually brings happiness to me and those that I care for; whether or not a morally ideal world is achievable through my moral effort bears little relevance to my current motivation. Premise (1) will be unpersuasive if HHV is understood as the possibility of a morally ideal world.

Alternatively, we may understand HHV as the existence of a system in the actual world according to which virtue will be rewarded by happiness. Again, it is questionable whether

people will indeed be demoralized if they do not believe in the existence of such a system. For example, the Stoics insisted on a life of virtue without any satisfaction of one's natural desires (which is an important part of the happiness understood in the current sense).[4] However, even if we grant that most human beings will in fact be demoralized when not believing that such a system exists, there is still a serious objection: a person can be said virtuous only if that person consistently acts in a virtuous way, and a truly virtuous act should be an act that is done because it is the right thing to do, not because it will bring happiness.[5]

Let me explain. The "moral advantage" of believing in HHV that the current practical argument stresses is *success in performing moral or virtuous actions*. A moral or virtuous act, according to a Kantian or a theist, is an act that is done for the right sort of reason – often in spite of potential cost to one's self-interest.[6] Being demoralized – that is, failing to be successfully motivated to act morally – as a result of not knowing whether one's action will be rewarded by happiness fails to meet the requirement of virtue (understood as a property of action, not person), at least within a Kantian or a theist moral framework. Consequently, appealing to such a "moral"

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[4] Stoics, of course, believe that a life in accordance with virtue is a happy life. But their notion of happiness, which has nothing to do with satisfying natural desires, such as desires for food and wealth, is quite different from the notion of happiness in the current argument. See, for example, Dirk Baltzly (2010).

[5] There is an ambiguity regarding the term "virtue": virtue as a quality of a person (one's being virtuous), and virtue as a quality of a person's action (one's performing a virtuous act).

[6] Some moral theorists, such as utilitarians, may understand a moral act as referring to an act that objectively brings about the best outcome, and a virtuous act as referring to an act that is accompanied by a good motive. Thus, for them, a moral act and a virtuous act are different. However, this distinction is irrelevant in the current discussion, given that the most relevant moral framework here is a Kantian or a theist one. There are two reasons why a Kantian or a theist moral framework is the most relevant in the current discussion. First, this is obviously an argument made by Kant to justify theistic beliefs. Second, if an act-centered moral framework such as utilitarianism is presumed by the argument, it will be unclear why theism is needed for believing in HHV, which is a point we will discuss later in this section. For these reasons, I treat moral action and virtuous action as synonymous in the current discussion.

advantage to justify the belief in HHV can be *self-defeating*: the very need for a belief in HHV to be sufficiently motivated to act morally risks betrayal of virtue.

Some proponents of the practical argument responded by saying that self-interest "remains a powerful motivation for the best of us" and a life without self-interest motivation "would hardly be recognizable as human" (Adams 1987, 157). What a virtuous act requires, they claim, is not that the actor is free from incentives provided by self-interest, but that such incentives are "subordinate to the incentive provided by the moral law". Insofar as the actor does not treat his or her happiness as "the sole end" and everything else merely "a means to" it, the actor acts virtuously (Hare 1996, 76). Thus, one may respond to the previous objection by denying that the need for a belief in HHV to sustain moral motivation necessarily makes the act not virtuous.

This response, however, misses the point. The crucial point of that objection is not that having incentives provided by self-interest makes an act not virtuous, but that an act fails to be virtuous if the incentives provided by self-interest outweigh, in practice, the motive to do what is right. This point can be seen more clearly by carefully considering what demoralization really means. Suppose that I am deciding between buying a new iphone and buying the medicine needed to save a friend's life. If I fail to do the right thing as a result of not knowing whether my act will eventually bring me happiness, my failure shows that my desire for a new iphone is stronger than my desire to save a friend's life such that I need some extra motivating force (i.e. the assurance of my future happiness) to help me overcome my self-interest. Thus, what I manifest in this instance of demoralization – i.e. failing to be successfully motivated to do the right thing – is a displaced order of practical reasons: I allow moral reasons to be outweighed by my desire to have a new iphone. This displaced order of practical reasons is what makes the act

not virtuous. A virtuous act does not require us to rid ourselves of all desires for self-interest; but it does require us to place our self-interest in the right order in relation to moral reasons in action.

There might be two further responses. One response is that the struggle against inclinations to advance one's self-interest is conducive to moral development. Everybody has natural inclinations to advance self-interest, yet one can train oneself to weaken such inclinations and subject oneself to the constraints of one's moral sense. As long as one continues to constrain one's inclinations and make them consistent with morality, one is still "genuinely committed to a moral life" (Hare 1996, 77-78). Thus, virtue does not require us to have the right order of practical reasons right away, but to be moving in the right direction.

This response shifts from the discussion of "virtue" as a property of an action to the discussion of "virtue" as a property of a person. But maybe how one fares morally as a whole (or in the longer term) is the more important dimension of moral assessment than how one fares morally on a particular occasion. Still, this response is problematic in several other ways. First, this response, if works at all, will help to avoid the objection of self-defeat only for those who are at the early stage of their moral development. Second, it may also be argued that a genuine effort to constrain one's inclinations should be an effort in the direction of cultivating stronger moral sentiments, rather than in the direction of catering to one's self-interest. If, in our moral training, we simply borrow extra motivating force from belief in HHV – that is, using desires for long-term self-interest to thwart desires for short-term self-interest, we continue feeding to the strength of our self-interest desires, rather than trying to weaken and constrain them.

The other response is that virtue does not always require us to place moral reasons above self-interest reasons. Occasionally letting one's moral reasons be outweighed by self-interest

reasons, especially when the self-interest at issue is significant enough, does not violate the requirement of virtue.

However, if being demoralized on such occasions does not violate the requirement of virtue, then demoralization will not be so "morally undesirable". Consequently, there will not be a true moral advantage in believing in HHV. One may further argue that, without believing in HHV, we will be demoralized much more frequently and demoralized even when the self-interest at stake is relatively insignificant. But then such demoralization will surely fail to meet the requirement of virtue. Thus, there is a dilemma for this strategy of response: if it tries to weaken the requirement of virtue in order to meet the objection of self-defeat, it will also weaken the moral advantage that belief in HHV is supposed to provide; if it tries to strengthen the moral advantage by aggrandizing the moral failure that would result from not believing in HHV, it will also strengthen the objection of self-defeat.

Therefore, this classic practical argument fails to show that there is a true moral advantage in believing in HHV. What it shows is, at best, a practical advantage – *believing in HHV will gratify our desires for happiness, which in turn will result in a better chance of being successfully motivated to do what is right*.

Now, one may ask: "What's wrong with a practical advantage?" The reason why making the jump is significant to the climber or winning her desired person's love is significant to the courter is also practical – it promotes their self-interest. Thus, by analogy, shouldn't a practical advantage be sufficient in the case of theistic beliefs too?

The problem, however, is that this practical advantage is likely to be offset by the "moral disadvantage" implicated in the current practical argument. Consider the following case: believing one's own race is superior to other races will help a player win an important match

against a player of a different race. In this case, even if believing in one's racial superiority will bring great practical benefits to the player, our intuition is that he should not accept that belief. The need for a belief in HHV, as we discussed earlier, manifests a displaced order of practical reasons – one lets one's moral reasons be outweighed in action by self-interest reasons. Such an order of practical reasons does not ring in concord with virtue. Thus, just as we can question the appropriateness of one's need for confidence to win because the confidence is based on a sense of racial superiority that is morally objectionable, we can question the appropriateness of one's need for moral fortitude because the kind of moral fortitude is also based on something morally objectionable.

It is true that people desire happiness and should be allowed to pursue it. But when there comes a time to sacrifice happiness for what is right, one should not have to rely on the belief that one's moral action will definitely be rewarded by happiness in order to be successfully motivated to perform that act. Otherwise, an *ad hominem* objection looms not afar.

So far, I have assumed in my analysis of the practical argument (based on the second interpretation of HHV) that the reason-giving or motivating force of believing in HHV resides in people's desire for their own happiness (and perhaps happiness of those close to them), which makes this motivating force self-interest-based. However, one may point out that the motivating force can also come from a desire for other people's happiness – a desire that everyone "will be happy in the long run if they do right", which is in accord with virtue (Hare 1996, 77-78). This way of understanding why belief in HHV would be motivating avoids the objection of self-defeat.

However, this understanding will lead to the same problem that the first interpretation of HHV does – why must *I* be demoralized if I do not believe in the harmony of happiness and virtue for other people? If, as Kant assumes, we are in fact strongly driven by our natural

inclinations to promote self-interest, then why cannot we be adequately motivated insofar as our own happiness is secured? Thus, if we understand the motivating force of belief in HHV as residing primarily in concerns for other people's happiness, even though this may help to avoid the objection of self-defeat, it will undermine the practical argument in another way: it will make Premise (1) unpersuasive.

Apart from Premise (1), Premise (4) has also been challenged. Why should we think that theism is the most adequate theory for HHV? An idea like HHV is not alien to naturalist moral theories. For example, consequentialism defines moral right or wrong in terms of the maximization of overall happiness. One may argue that, with a proper system of value assessment, it seems reasonable to expect that certain forms of consequentialism can maximize happiness for every person who acts virtuously. For example, a consequentialist theory may have an account of value such that only virtuous people's happiness counts as utility, the happiness that evil people get from their evil-doing counts as disutility. By employing such an account of value, in conjunction with some proper calculating mechanism, a consequentialist theory may bring about the maximization of happiness for every virtuous person.[7]

Thus, Premise (4) also needs some proper defense if the practical argument is to be convincing. But Premise (4) is not the focus of this paper. We focused on the problems around Premise (1). We have seen that, while existing responses have, to a certain extent, alleviated some of the worries, a serious problem – namely, the problem of self-defeat, which leads to an ad hominem objection – remains unanswered. A practical argument that can avoid this problem, better yet an argument that can show a true moral advantage, would make a more convincing case for theism.

[7] For further discussions on challenges to Premise (4), see, for example, Adams (1987).

IV. Challenge to the Justificatory Principle

Traditional challenges to the practical argument focused on its premises; but I think the justificatory principle that the argument implicitly employs can also be called to question. Even if belief in God has some practical advantage, that practical advantage may not provide the same kind of justificatory power that the Jamesian-type beliefs in *Mountain Climber* and *Confident Courter* do.

According to premises (1)-(5), it is important for us to persevere in our moral life and accepting theism makes perseverance most likely. It is thus rational to accept theism – namely (6). The inference from (5) to (6) seems to rely on the following principle of justification:

> *Practical Principle of Justification* (*Practical*): It is rational for *S* to accept that *p* despite insufficient evidence for *p* if, insofar as *S* can tell, (1) believing that *p* makes it more likely that *g* is true, and (2) *g*'s being true bears great positive practical significance to *S*.[8]

Should we accept *Practical*? Yes, if this is indeed the justificatory principle that underlies our judgments in *Mountain Climber* and *Confident Courter*, which are cases we find very compelling. But is this principle truly what underlies those Jamesian-type cases?

Consider first *Mountain Climber*: what's practically significant to the climber is that *he will make the jump*, and the belief that he needs to have in order to make this more likely is "I will make the jump". That is to say, the state of affairs described by the proposition *p* is *g* itself. Likewise, in *Confident Courter*, the outcome, *her desired man will like her*, is precisely what the

[8] For other analyses of the underlying justificatory principle in the practical argument, see Gale (1980) and Chignell (2007). While Chignell thinks that believing that *p* must be a "hypothetically necessary condition" of *g*, I think it only needs to significantly increase *g*'s likelihood.

courter needs to believe. Thus, the justificatory principle underlying our judgments in these two cases is the following:

Self-Fulfilling Principle of Justification (*Self-Fulfilling*): It is rational for *S* to accept that *p* despite insufficient evidence for *p* if, insofar as *S* can tell, (1) believing that *p* makes it more likely that *p* is true, and (2) *p*'s being true bears great positive practical significance to *S*.

Self-Fulfilling seems a stronger principle of justification than *Practical*. Admittedly, *S* has a practical justification for believing that *p* in both *Practical* and *Self-Fulfilling*, as the existence of a practical justification hinges solely on the existence of some practical advantage that believing *p* will produce. However, what is at issue here is not whether *S* is practically justified, but whether *S* is rational. There is reason to believe that rationality is also sensitive to epistemic considerations. For example, it seems irrational to accept a belief merely on the basis of its practical significance when that belief is also known to be false. When we take into account both epistemic and practical considerations, a belief supported by *Self-Fulfilling* seems more reasonable to accept than a belief supported only by *Practical*. In addition to the practical significance of believing that *p*, the belief supported by *Self-Fulfilling* also increases the probability of *p*'s being true; by contrast, the belief supported by *Practical* does not contribute to *p*'s being true at all. The conducing relation between the believing and the truth of that belief makes *Self-Fulfilling* more plausible epistemically.

This challenges the strategy of treating theistic beliefs as analogous to the Jamesian-type beliefs. The reason why we find cases like *Mountain Climber* and *Confident Courter* so compelling may be that we are, implicitly, employing the stronger justificatory principle, *Self-Fulfilling*. Thus, the compelling-ness of the Jamesian-type cases cannot be automatically

transferred to the case of theistic beliefs: there may be two distinct justificatory principles at work.

Indeed, we have reason to believe that cases underlain by *Practical* are usually less compelling. Consider, for example, a case Kant offered as an illustration for the practical argument: it is rational, despite lacking sufficient evidence, for a doctor to firmly believe whatever diagnosis that his best judgment offers him, for doing so increases his chance of successfully treating the patient (Chignell 2007, 339). The justification that underlies this case is *Practical*, not *Self-Fulfilling*. As critics pointed out, this case is not convincing: we have good reason to think that it is actually more rational for the doctor to leave it open, when lacking sufficient evidence, that his current diagnosis may not be accurate and to be ready to adjust his diagnosis. If, for instance, the doctor could have more conclusive evidence by further having the patient's blood sample tested at a professional laboratory, it would be less rational, or even irrational, for him to rely on a diagnosis insufficiently supported just for the practical significance mentioned above. This result is hardly surprising: *Practical* is after all a weaker justificatory principle for rationality.

However, this does not mean that there is no way to justify the inference from (5) to (6). *Practical* is not without its own plausibility; but it needs to be strengthened by further constraints. For example, it needs to be constrained in a way such that it would not permit accepting a belief merely on the basis of its practical significance when it is known to be false.[9] We need to find ways to make *Practical* more stringent, epistemically and otherwise.

[9] By contrast, *Self-Fulfilling* is immune to this kind of problem, because in *Self-Fulfilling* the likelihood of *p*'s being true is influenced by whether *S* believes *p* – that is, no conclusive evidence can be had prior to *S*'s choice of whether to believe *p*. If the agent already knows that *p* is false, then from the agent's

One way to strengthen *Practical* is to add a constraint that James proposed in *The Will to Believe*. James proposed that practical justification only works for issues that "cannot … be decided on intellectual grounds." (James 1979, 20) We should not accept anything that can be proven to be false by available scientific evidence. By constraining *Practical* to only issues that cannot be decided on the best available scientific evidence, we avoid making the problematic claim that it is rational to accept something that can be readily proven false.

Another constraint we can add to *Practical* is that, among all the beliefs that increase the likelihood of *g* by the same degree, *p* must be the most frugal insofar as *S* can tell. By frugality, I mean the property of containing the smallest number of epistemically un-established propositions. For example, the belief that this world consists of physical bodies is more frugal than the belief that this world consists of physical bodies and ghosts and spirits; the belief that water is H_2O and it is transparent, whose truth is epistemically well established, is more frugal than the belief that some water brings back youth to whoever drinks it, whose truth is not established.

The need for the frugality constraint can best be seen from the following example. If either believing that some deity is going to assist me in making the jump or believing that my past jumping record has proven my ability to make the jump will adequately increase my chance to make the jump (and increase it to the same degree), it will be less rational to accept the first belief. The reason why it is more rational to accept a more frugal belief is not that such a belief is more likely to be true – reality may indeed be complex, but that such a belief incurs a justificatory debt that is lighter and thus easier to be offset by the belief's practical significance.

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perspective, believing it to be true would not make *p* more likely to be true, and thus one of the conditions of *Self-Fulfilling* will not be satisfied.

So far, we have been primarily concerned with the believer's subjective justification – whether believing something will bring significant practical benefits, whether the belief is known to be false, and whether the belief is the most frugal in the relevant category insofar as the believer can tell. But the rationality of accepting a belief cannot just depend on a believer's subjective justification; it must also conform to some objective standards of rationality. An insane mind, for instance, can meet all the above requirements on subjective justification, yet fail to pass the test of rationality. A further objective constraint is needed: judging from an ordinary person's point of view, *S*'s believing that *p* on the basis of the belief's practical significance must not be irrational.

This means several things. First, *p* must be logically possible. It is irrational to accept something logically impossible, no matter how subjectively justified a believer is. Second, the mechanism by which believing that *p* makes *g* more likely to be true must not be irrational. For example, believing that dogs see the world in blue may, inexplicably, help the climber make his jump on a particular occasion; but it is still irrational to accept the belief merely by virtue of this accidental practical benefit.

Lastly, the practical significance involved – either *g* itself or any practical significance conducive to *g*'s being true – must be things that one has good reason to *want*.[10] Consider the following case.

Anxious Courter: A woman wants to court a man, but loathes rejection so much that, if she has the slightest doubt that he might decline any of her requests, she would be totally

[10] This constraint is different from James's *momentousness* condition, which has more to do with the nature of *g*'s practical significance. The current constraint has more to do with the nature of *the reason(s)* to want *g*.

demoralized. Thus, to avoid demoralization, she needs to believe not only that he will like her but also that he will never decline any of her requests.

Believing that her desired person will not decline any of her requests is practically significant to the courter because it helps to gratify her distaste for rejection, which in turn increases her chance of winning that person's affections. But is it rational for her to believe so? The answer seems to be *no*: it is irrational to want a rejection-free experience in courtship.

Adams discusses this point in *The Virtue of Faith*. He writes:

> "It would be irrational to accept a belief on the ground that it gives you a *reason* for doing something that you want to do. … It may be rational to be swayed by a practical argument, on the other hand, if one is not inventing a reason for doing something, but trying to sustain in oneself the emotional conditions for doing something one already has enough reason to want to do." (1987, 154-155, original emphasis)

Here Adams distinguishes between things that we *already have enough reason to want* and things we *don't already have enough reason to want*. It is rational, according to Adams, to accept a belief on the ground that believing it makes it more likely that we achieve something we already have enough reason to want; it is irrational, or at least less rational, to accept a belief on the ground that believing it makes it more likely that we achieve something we are yet to acquire enough reason to want – in that case we are merely "inventing a reason" for accepting the belief.

What does Adams mean by "enough reason"? Notice that the mere fact that we want something already implies a reason for wanting it – it is attractive to us. Why is wanting something not "enough" reason for wanting it?

Consider *Anxious Courter* again. The reason why we find that case suspicious is that it seems unreasonable for the courter to want a rejection-free courting experience. By contrast,

survival and finding love are not things unreasonable to want – this is partly why we find cases like *Mountain Climber* and *Confident Courter* persuasive. This gives us a clue as to how to best understand what Adams means by "enough reason": one does not have enough reason to want something if wanting it violates some objective standard of reasonableness – a standard that an ordinary person should honor in the given circumstance. A rejection-free experience, for instance, is not what a reasonable person should normally expect in courtship.

Thus, I propose the following way of understanding Adams's constraint: *the practical significance involved must not be based on a want that violates some objective standard of reasonableness*. This constraint helps to distinguish cases like *Anxious Courter* from cases like *Confident Courter*.

To sum up, we have discussed several challenges to the classic practical argument. One is that it is unclear why Premise (4) must be true: whether traditional theism is indeed the best system that guarantees HHV remains a matter of dispute. We also looked at two further challenges, which had not received much attention in the literature. First, it is questionable whether, without believing in HHV, we will indeed be demoralized. Premise (1) is persuasive only when HHV is taken to be the existence in the actual world of a system in which virtue is rewarded by happiness. But when HHV is so understood, the argument will suffer the problem of self-defeat. Consequently, instead of showing a "moral advantage", the argument contains a "moral disadvantage", which makes it vulnerable to an ad hominem objection. Second, even if accepting theism is indeed the best way to prevent demoralization, this practical significance of theism does not justify theistic beliefs in the same way that the practical significance of Jamesian-type beliefs justifies them. For this practical significance to provide adequate justification for accepting theism, some additional constraints need to be met.

Practical Principle of Justification-Proper (*Practical-P*): It is rational for *S* to accept that *p* despite insufficient evidence for *p* if and only if,

(i) insofar as *S* can tell,

(i-1) believing that *p* makes it more likely that *g* is true;

(i-2) the truth of *g* bears great positive practical significance to *S*;

(i-3) the truth of *p* cannot be falsified by the best scientific evidence;

(i-4) *p* is the most frugal among all the beliefs that increase the likelihood of *g* by the same degree;

(ii) judging from an ordinary person's point of view,

(ii-1) *p* is logically possible,

(ii-2) the mechanism through which believing that *p* makes *g* more likely to be true is not irrational,

(ii-3) the practical significance of *g* (or the practical significance whose attainment is conducive to *g*'s being true) is something that *S* wants without violating some objective standard of reasonableness.

Practical-P presents some problems for the classic practical argument. First, it is questionable whether traditional theism, which the argument intends to justify, meets (i-4). Traditional theism is, after all, a very thick system. One can legitimately question whether a more frugal system is available that still supplies the needed moral fortitude. Second, it is at least disputable whether HHV is something to want that does not violate some objective standard of reasonableness. For example, one may argue, based on the problem of self-defeat, that certainty of future happiness is not a reasonable expectation in performing a moral act. These challenges and problems are probably not knockdown arguments against the classic practical argument. But

they do weaken its strength. A practical argument that can avoid these challenges and problems would make a more compelling case. In what follows I would like to propose an improved practical argument.

V. A New Practical Argument

Let me also start with an example.

> *Karamazof*: Karamazof lives in a morally corrupt society, where the political machine is controlled by cruel and manipulative oppressors, prisons are filled with righteous and truthful people, wiliness and trickery are admired, integrity and honesty mocked, and hunger for power and wealth leads to prosperity, belief in modesty and morality brings poverty. Despite all these, Karamazof aspires to be moral, to be a person who always acts justly and speaks truthfully. Yet, due to these grave adversities, he realizes how difficult it is for him to persevere. His moral pursuit seriously disadvantages him, sometimes even endangers him; he is mocked by others for being so "stubborn"; he may, in the end, even doubt morality itself. Karamazof feels helpless until he recognizes that there is God.

Karamazof realizes that he needs to believe in the existence of a transcendent being, who is perfectly morally good and wants what is good for human beings. Once he accepts the existence of such a being, he will believe that morality has a meaning that transcends the meaning of all the worldly concerns – concerns for pleasure, economic security, social esteem, and so on. And once he believes in the transcendent meaning of morality, the material hardships will be less disheartening and the corrupting social influence less compelling. Such a belief, a belief in mere

theism, will best supply him with the strength to persevere in the face of grave moral adversities.[11]

Thus, Karamazof has the following argument in defense of his conversion to mere theism:

a) For anyone who lives in a morally adverse society, it is difficult to act always according to what is morally right.
b) Accepting mere theism makes it most likely for one to have strong enough reason to be motivated to act always according to what is morally right.
c) There is a strong moral reason to want to act always according to what is morally right.
d) Therefore, there is a strong moral reason for accepting mere theism.
e) Therefore, it is rational to accept mere theism.

VI. Assessing the New Practical Argument

Let's consider how this new practical argument avoids the problems that Kant's classic version faces. First, the current argument does not rely on a dubious premise that belief in HHV is necessary for moral perseverance. Instead, it starts with a relatively uncontroversial claim – it is difficult to always act morally in a morally adverse environment.

Second, the relation between belief in the transcendent meaning of morality and ability to persevere in a morally adverse environment also seems quite plausible. It requires extraordinary courage and resolution for, say, a lawyer to risk punishment to help an innocent dissident to escape political persecution, or for a scholar to risk his career to speak up for truth and justice to

[11] This argument may sound like James Beattie's consolation argument in his *Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth, in Opposition to Sophistry and Scepticism*. However, Beattie's argument places the justification of theistic beliefs on the good that such belief brings to the suffering – namely, consolation. In this sense, his argument is more in line with the Jamesian-type practical arguments. By contrast, the current argument places the justification solely on the moral reason to act morally.

the public. In such circumstances, people need to firmly believe in the overriding importance of morality in order to overcome desires that pull them in the opposite direction.

This claim stands in need of some clarification. One may object that if the evil we face is so dire that it threatens to destroy everything that we hold dearly, we will be able to stand up against it even if we do not believe in the overriding importance of morality. For example, when the Nazi army threatened to destroy their beloved homeland, soldiers in the red army were able to fight to their death in Stalingrad.

Evil, however, does not usually work in a way that totally repulses us; more often than not, it entices us. An attorney may be promised the money he desperately needs for a life-saving surgery on his ailing child, if he stops defending the political dissident. A professor may be promised a peaceful life that he and his family want so badly, if he remains silent on a particular political issue. The gravest moral adversity is not usually the one that denies us any hope, but the one that promises us something sweet in return. That is why fighting against it is so hard. Our best chance to stand firmly against such grave moral adversity is to believe firmly in the outmost importance of morality. Yet, such a belief can only be consistently supplied by a theistic moral system.

To be very clear, I am not arguing that no other naturalist moral theories can provide us with moral motivation, or that nobody who holds a naturalist moral theory can have an overriding moral motivation. My point is rather that, from a theoretical point of view, naturalist moral theories lack the rational resources to justify an overriding motivating force of morality. Even though individuals who adopt a naturalist moral view may in fact be able to act morally in face of grave adversity, the ranking of moral reasons in their systems of practical reasoning cannot be rationally justified by their naturalist theoretical frameworks.

Historically, efforts to replace a supernatural moral authority with a naturalist moral foundation typically find their home in the appeal to *Reason*. For example, utilitarianism seeks to ground the motivating force of morality in our desire for happiness – the reason why the maximization of overall happiness is worthy of desire is that we in fact desire happiness. Classic social contract theory aims to ground the motivating force of morality on rational self-interest – the most rational choice for an individual who aims at maximizing self-interest is to act in accord with a set of shared cooperative rules (among which are moral rules), since in an ideal situation where everyone is rational, the best way or the only way to ensure that everyone's self-interest is maximized is to comply with that set of rules. Some other theorists aim to ground the motivating force of morality not on rational self-interest, but on the sheer commanding force of reason – valid moral principles are what every rational agent ought to recognize.

However, all these reason-based naturalistic moral theories fail to provide good rational justification for an overriding motivating force of morality. Any theory that tries to explain the binding force of morality by appealing to desires for one's own happiness faces the difficulty of explaining why one will be motivated to protect or promote *other* people's happiness, especially in face of grave cost to one's own happiness. Any theory that appeals to a hypothetical agreement in an idealized situation faces the difficulty of explaining why such an agreement could still provide the same reason-giving force in a situation where the stipulated ideal conditions are not applicable. For example, in a society where treacherous people are prosperous and honest people are suffering, one could hardly persuade anybody to be honest by simply reasoning that "you ought to be honest because should everybody be honest, honest behavior would bring the best outcome". And any theory that appeals to the commanding force of reason faces the difficulty of explaining how such a purely abstract, and often formal, notion, quite

detached from our particular practical interests, could have an overriding motivating force in the face of grave cost to our real interests.[12]

These arguments are, of course, very cursory. Providing a full-fledged discussion on all relevant naturalistic moral theories would go beyond the limit of this paper. I will simply quote Connie S. Rosati, who has, quite correctly, observed that "contemporary philosophers …. have uniformly rejected the suggestion that a grasp of morality's requirements would produce overriding motivation to act accordingly." (2006, Sect. 2)

But without such an overriding motivating force, it would be difficult for a person like Karamazof to persevere. In face of grave moral adversity, only when we firmly believe in the overriding importance of morality can we have strong enough reason to be motivated to do what is right. Mere theism provides that needed reason-giving force. When we believe that there is a superior and transcendent being, who is perfectly good and wants what is good for us, we could firmly believe in the transcendent meaning of what appears to us, with clarity and conviction, to be morally good. With such a belief, we will then be supplied with a motivation powerful enough

[12] It should be noted that some other theorists try to ground the motivating force of morality, in part, on the reason to act according to the function (*ergon*) of a human being. Does this idea of the human function bear any reason-giving force such that those who believe it would be sufficiently motivated to act morally even in the face of grave moral adversity? First, the idea of a human function bears a quite non-naturalistic smell. Some theorists have tried to construct a naturalistic interpretation of it. For example, in *On Virtue Ethics*, Hursthouse (1999) developed a theory of ethical naturalism, according to which "human beings are ethically good in so far as their ethically relevant aspects foster the four ends [individual survival, continuance of the species, enjoyment and freedom from pain, and good functioning of the social group] appropriate to a social animal, in the way characteristic of the species." This theory is naturalistic because the four ends, on the basis of which ethical good is evaluated, are natural ends. However, if the special reason-giving force of being characteristically human resides in the desirability of the four natural ends, then appealing to the human function will not provide any extra reason-giving force in addition to what we already have in desires for those four ends (survival, pleasure, and so on). Consequently, this theory fares no better than utilitarianism and classic social contract theory in terms of providing moral motivation, and thus would face the same problems that those theories face.

to override other worldly concerns.[13] No naturalist theory can rationally imbue morality with such overriding importance. To do so is to give morality a sense of transcendence – that is, to *consecrate* morality.

Finally, let's consider whether the current practical argument meets all the additional constraints in *Practical-P*. Firstly, mere theism is something that cannot be decided on the best available scientific evidence: science does not provide conclusive evidence against the existence of a transcendent being. Secondly, mere theism, compared to its naturalist competitors, is thick enough to supply the needed theoretical resources for justifying an overriding motivating power of morality; and compared to its theistic alternatives, it is the most frugal view – it invokes only a thin notion of God. Thirdly, mere theism is not logically impossible and the mechanism by which accepting it increases the probability of perseverance does not involve anything irrational. Lastly, we have legitimate reason to want to act always according to what is morally right. Indeed, one may even say that we are morally obligated to want to act always according to what is morally right. Thus, by appealing to the practical significance of theism, we are not just inventing a reason to do what we want to do for our self-interest; we have an independent legitimate reason to want to act morally. This new argument, thus, meets all additional conditions in *Practical-P*.

VII. Objections

[13] It may appear that my argument presupposes anti-Humeanism – the thesis that beliefs about moral facts have internal reason-giving force and thus are motivating. I find anti-Humeanism plausible (for reasons given by Shafer-Landau in his *Moral Realism: A Defense*). However, my argument need not presuppose anti-Humeanism, because the reason-giving force that I talk about here could come from our desires as well, desires that we would not have should we not believe in the existence of a transcendent being. For example, our desire for confirmation by a higher being or our thirst for the ultimate meaning could provide strong motivation for us to act morally.

One objection is this: Do you seriously believe that anyone can believe in God just by virtue of this argument? The answer: I do not. But this argument is not meant to give a sufficient reason for believing in God; it is meant to give a good reason for accepting God. It gives us good reason to put ourselves in a position that could lead us to enter the state of believing, such as to start to go to church, to start to pray, to start to be more open to the possibility of non-natural existence, to start to be less dismissive toward reports of miraculous events, etc.

Here is another objection: this argument only applies to a small number of people who, unfortunately, live in a morally adverse environment; it cannot be used to justify theistic beliefs in general. To this, I have two responses. On the one hand, I agree that the current argument only applies to those situated in a certain type of circumstances. But I do not think it is a small number of people that we are talking about. It is perhaps not exaggerating to say that one third of the world population is living in a "morally adverse" environment: oppressive government, lack of tolerance, increasing corruptive influence from corporative greed, and so on. An argument that applies to billions of concrete individuals is as good as an argument that applies to everyone, but only in abstraction.

On the other hand, with some modification, the current argument can be extended to even people who live in a "morally benign" society. Consider this example.

> *Karamazof**: Karamazof* lives in a society where most people act justly and properly honor justice and truthfulness, the political authority is elected through a fair process and in general encourages moral action, and honest and diligent people usually enjoy their material prosperity. Karamazof* has no difficulty doing what is morally right. However, he has a much higher moral aspiration than just doing what is right – he aspires to be the most virtuous person that he can be. He realizes how difficult it is to do that. For example, he finds

it really difficult to give away one third of his income to help famine relief in Africa, for it would require him to give up a nice house in a pretty neighborhood that he has planned to buy for years; he finds it really difficult to accept a job in a less developed part of the country where more people would benefit from his teaching (and he could still do quality research), for this would require him to give up the better paid job at a more prestigious institute that he has worked very hard to get; and he finds it, from time to time, really difficult to forgive a colleague who publicly insulted him. He even starts to doubt whether it is indeed so important to be as virtuous as possible, for his friends always say, "You try too hard!" Just when Karamazof* is about to give up his aspiration, he realizes that there is God.

There is good moral reason for Karamazof* to want to be as virtuous as possible. But it is not easy to be always caring and loving, always ready to act altruistically, and always graceful and forgiving. It is possible that one can actually achieve all these while remaining a naturalist about morality. But mere theism provides the best theoretical resources to sustain such a moral aspiration. Thus, Karamazof* has the following argument in defense of his conversion to mere theism:

(a*) Even for someone who lives in a "morally benign" society, it is difficult to be as virtuous as possible.

(b*) Accepting mere theism makes it most likely for one to have strong enough reason to be motivated to be as virtuous as possible.

(c*) There is a moral reason to want to be as virtuous as possible.

(d*) Therefore, there is a moral reason for accepting mere theism.

(e*) Therefore, it is rational to accept mere theism.

Admittedly, the practical argument that Karamazof* has is weaker than what Karamazof has, since the moral reason to be as virtuous as possible is perhaps weaker than the moral reason to do what is morally right. But if one in fact chooses to believe in God in order to become the most virtuous person that one can be, one definitely has a legitimate justification for doing that. The current argument is not an argument for an *obligation* to believe in God; it only serves to justify the rationality of accepting God.[14]

Here is a third objection: there is no evidence that theists are more virtuous than atheists. For example, some recent studies suggest that secular and religious participants are about equally pro-social and that religious pro-sociality does not necessarily involve more virtuous motivation (Norenzayan and Shariff 2008; Paciotti et al. 2011).

My first response is that there are studies suggesting that a certain level of association between religious beliefs and altruism, empathy, and self-regulation does exist (Saroglou et al. 2004; 2005; McCullough and Willoughby 2009). My second response is that people who claim to be theists do not necessarily firmly believe in the importance of morality. The main thrust of my argument is that, when facing difficult moral tasks, such as to morally persevere in face of grave moral adversity or to be as virtuous as possible, firm belief in the transcendent meaning of morality best supplies the needed justification for an overriding motivating power of morality. But perseverance may not be the reason why some people are theists. Thus, these empirical studies, even if valid, are not necessarily counterexamples to my argument.

[14] Another often raised objection to the practical argument is that we cannot control our belief and thus, even if it is rational to believe in God, it is not in our control to choose what to believe. But this objection presupposes that the purpose of the practical argument is to show there is a rational *requirement* to believe in God. While some versions of the practical argument do seem to serve this purpose, it is not the purpose of the current practical argument. Moreover, even if we are not in control of what we believe, we are often in control of whether to put ourselves in a position that will lead us to believe.

A fourth objection is this: if this argument were right, it would also be justified to, say, take a pill if that pill can cause us to have strong enough moral motivation; but drugging ourselves into illusion is epistemically disconcerting. My response is that sometimes it is indeed justified to "take a pill" and we have already been practicing it. People who suffer from severe depression need to take medication to protect themselves from suicidal thoughts. Such medication often generates senses of satisfaction and joyfulness that do not truly represent the patient's circumstance. Yet using medication is viewed as not only justified but necessary in such cases. It is not novel that belief in God is sometimes taken to be a cure to the depressive human conditions. Only that the optimism it inspires is more genuinely rooted in real human relationships, and lasts much longer.

Let's consider one last objection. If mere theism were justified because we need such a belief to persevere in a world full of moral adversities, then in a world where such adversities no longer exist we would not be justified to believe in God. I appreciate the possibility of a "morally optimal" world. But maybe a world in which people can easily act according to what is right and be as virtuous as possible is just *Paradise Regained*, in which we are already with God; or it is a world in which everyone truly believes in the transcendent meaning of morality, and thus belief in God is actually a pre-condition of such a world. So, without knowing the details of that world, it is premature to judge whether or not belief in God will be justified in that world.

VIII. Conclusion

Morality is demanding. It often asks us to do things that would cause great loss to our own interests. Because of this demandingness, classic practical arguments and the theistic systems they picture are too thick – their reliance on a promise of future happiness to motivate a moral

life suffers the problem of self-defeat. Also because of this demandingness, naturalist moral systems are too thin – they cannot support strong enough motivation to carry out those demanding moral tasks.

Some people may worry that mere theism is also too thin: most of us need the prospect of happiness to be able to persevere in our moral lives. However, we should not forget that moral actions are themselves joyful and awesome. When we perform a generous act to help out someone in dire need, that act often brings more joy to ourselves than to the person being helped. When we overcome all the adversities to finally save an unjustly persecuted victim, often we, more than anyone else, are convinced of the beauty of justice. We do not have to rely on the prospect of future happiness to be motivated; the joy and awe that we experience in our moral actions are themselves motivating. We only need to believe that such feelings are genuine manifestations of God's way, and to do our best to cultivate them and grow them. Finally, let me quote somebody who says it better than anyone else – "Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the more often and steadily reflection is occupied with them: the starry heaven above me and the moral law within me."

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