



# CRITICAL INSIGHTS

## Life of Pi

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## Believing without Evidence: Pragmatic Arguments for Religious Belief in *Life of Pi*

Alberto Oya

The aim of this essay is to show that Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* can be read as illustrating what philosophers usually identify as pragmatic arguments for religious belief. Ultimately, this seems to be the reason, in the short prologue that accompanies the novel, Martel claims *Life of Pi* to be "a story to make you believe in God" (xi). In summary, these arguments claim that even conceding the question of whether to believe that God exists or that He does not exist cannot be decided upon with the evidence we have, we are still justified to *decide* to believe in God because of the practical beneficial consequences this belief will bring to us. As I will argue, in Martel's *Life of Pi* it is this kind of pragmatic reasoning that originates and what makes the "story with animals" preferable over the "story without animals."

However, in claiming that *Life of Pi* expresses in fictional, non-explicitly philosophical language, this sort of pragmatic reasoning for religious belief, it is not to be understood that I am claiming that all the characters and situations we find in *Life of Pi* are reducible to this argument, nor that the literary richness of the novel is reduced to this single point. *Life of Pi* should be read as what it is, a novel, and not as if it were a philosophical or theological treatise aimed at rationally discussing the question of the nature of religious faith and its justification. My point here is that in taking this philosophical background of pragmatic arguments for religious faith into account we might be better able to capture not only the ultimate motivation behind Martel's aforementioned claim that this novel is "a story to make you believe in God" (xi), but also aspects of the narrative and the psychological complexity of its characters that might otherwise escape our attention.



## William James's Pragmatic Argument for Religious Belief

A classical and well-known formulation of a pragmatic argument for religious belief can be found in “The Will to Believe,” a lecture given to the Philosophical Clubs of Yale and Brown Universities in 1896 by the North American psychologist and philosopher William James (1842–1910), and published the following year as a chapter of his book *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*. In it, James aimed to defend “[. . .] our right to adopt a believing attitude in religious matters, in spite of the fact that our merely logical intellect may not have been coerced” (James 1–2).

William James’s argument stems from the claim that we cannot obtain conclusive evidence to form the belief that God exists or that He does not exist, insofar as the existence of God is a matter that goes beyond our experience. We are, then, not justified in forming the belief that God exists or that He does not exist on an evidential, empirical basis. On the face of it, it might seem that the most reasonable thing for us to do is to remain agnostic, to suspend our judgment regarding the question of the existence of God, while leaving open the possibility that one day new evidence may come to light that will somehow help us to conclude whether God does, in fact, exist, or He does not. According to James, however, our lack of evidence does not justify us in taking an agnostic stance given that in its practical consequences suspending our judgment is equal to already believing that God does not exist—and, as I just said, according to James atheism is not an evidentially justified position. James makes this point when claiming that the *option* between believing that God exists or believing that He does not is an option that is *forced* upon us:

We cannot escape the issue by remaining sceptical and waiting for more light, because, although we do avoid error in that way *if religion be untrue*, we lose the good [that religion is assumed to bring us] *if it be true*, just as certainly as if we positively chose to disbelieve. (James 26)



Hence, according to James, our believing attitude (either belief, disbelief, or agnosticism) cannot be justified on evidential, empirical grounds. Those who believe and those who do not, says James, do so on passional grounds. More concretely, to believe that the religious hypothesis is false (or to suspend our judgment regarding its truth value) is to “yield to our fear of its being error” (James 27), whereas to believe that the religious hypothesis is true is to “yield to our hope that it may be true” (James 27).

James then goes on to argue that it is *preferable* to stick to our hope that the religious hypothesis may be true than to stick to our fear that it may be false. This is so because by yielding to our fear of failing into error, by believing that the religious hypothesis is false, or by suspending our judgment, we will cut ourselves off from attaining the beneficial consequences that only come when the religious hypothesis is true, and we believe it. On the other hand, by sticking to our hope that the religious hypothesis may be true, by believing it, we will be leaving the door open to the only way of attaining the beneficial consequences that only come when the religious hypothesis is true, and we believe it. Thus, given that sticking to our hope that it may be true will leave open the possibility of attaining the beneficial consequences that occur when the religious hypothesis is true and we believe it, while sticking to our fear that it may be false will directly block any possibility to attain these beneficial consequences, it is *preferable*, James concludes, to believe that the religious hypothesis is true. Religious belief, then, is justified on pragmatic grounds, because of the beneficial consequences it brings with it and not because the empirical evidence we have points to it being true.

But what if it turns out to be the case that God does not, in fact, exist? One might criticize James that, in this case, our religious belief would have no beneficial consequences; and so, it would not be pragmatically justified. James’s answer is that even if the religious hypothesis turned out to be false and in the end God did not exist, our religious belief would still be pragmatically justified insofar as its practical value does not rely exclusively on attaining those momentous consequences that only appear when God actually



exists (such as, for example, attaining an endless existence through God's Salvation). According to James, our mere believing that God exists has, in itself, practical consequences that are positive enough so as to pragmatically justify our religious belief: A direct consequence of believing that God exists, which to James's thinking is independent of whether He does, in fact, exist or not, is that "we are better off even now" (James 30).

A hidden assumption in pragmatic arguments for religious belief is the claim that we can, at least on some occasions, willingly *decide* what to believe. The problem is that this seems to be an unacceptable position if *believing* is understood in its ordinary sense, as referring to the acceptance as a truth of some factual claim stating that the world is such and such and not otherwise. This point was developed by the British philosopher Bernard Williams (1929–2003) in his essay "Deciding to Believe" (1973). As Bernard Williams states, our beliefs aim at truth, which means that truth is something essential to our act of believing, in the sense that we cannot hold a belief without also holding that that belief is true. To put it in more logical, technical terms (where *P* refers to any belief we might hold): We cannot believe that *P* without believing that *P* is true. Thus, for example, we cannot believe that it is raining right now in London and, at the same time, believe that our belief "it is now raining in London" is false. However, and here comes Bernard Williams's argument, if it were possible for us to willingly decide what to believe, in believing that it is raining now in London, we would not necessarily be believing that our belief that "it is now raining in London" is true, insofar as our believing that it is raining in London would not be grounded in the world being such that it is actually raining now in London, but in our conscious decision to believe that it is raining now in London.

Pragmatic arguments might sidestep this problem if religious belief is understood in a *non-truth-dependent sense*, as referring to what philosophers usually name as a *non-factual* conception of religious faith. Religious faith would then be conceived as neither implying nor requiring an acceptance as being true of some given description of the world, but rather it would be conceived as a kind



of subjective, personal way of understanding the world and relating to it. Under this reading, there would be no problem in *deciding to believe*, as believing here would not be understood in its ordinary sense, as a matter of accepting as a truth a claim regarding the world being such and such and not otherwise, but in the sense of committing oneself to engage in some sort of religious way of life. However, it is important to emphasize that under this reading pragmatic arguments would not serve to justify us in accepting the *truth* that the world is such that God exists; nonetheless, pragmatic arguments might still prove convincing in showing that it is *preferable* (and in this sense, *reasonable*) to embrace a religious stance, provided these arguments succeed in showing that engaging in the sort of religious way of life they claim religious faith consists in would bring us some earthly benefit that would be unattainable otherwise.

### **Pragmatic Arguments for Religious Belief in *Life of Pi***

In the third and last part of the novel, when asked by Tomohiro Okamoto and Atsuro Chiba, the two representatives of the Maritime Department of the Japanese Ministry of Transport who are carrying out the investigation into why the *Tsimtsum* sank, Pi offers two *different* stories that both narrate his experience during his time as a castaway. First, the story with animals, which is described in detail in the second part of the book, and second, the story with people and not with animals, which Pi concedes to tell given Okamoto and Chiba's incredulity to believe the story with animals. Near the end of the interview, Pi makes an argument for claiming that the story with animals is *preferable* over the story without animals—and also states that the same reasoning applies to the question for God (“And so it goes with God” [Martel 317]). Pi's reasoning here takes the form of a pragmatic argument that is, in fact, rather similar to that defended by James in his “The Will to Believe.”

Before offering the story without animals, and aiming to defend himself against Okamoto and Chiba, who find the story with animals “a bit hard to believe” (296), Pi points out that there is nothing logically self-contradictory in the story with animals. Thus, “tigers don't contradict reality” (302). There is nothing logically self-



contradictory even in the idea of a carnivorous island. A carnivorous island might appear unlikely to us, but it is not something incoherent in the way that a square circle is. We can imagine its possibility, so consequently we cannot previously deny its actual existence through armchair reflection simply because, given our background knowledge, it appears to us as something unlikely to truly exist. Whether carnivorous islands exist or they do not is a matter to be decided via empirical research, not through *a priori* reasoning. Pi raises an analogy with bonsais to illustrate the point: The existence of “three-hundred-year-old trees that are two-feet tall that you can carry in your arms” (295) might also appear to be something very unlikely and hard to believe for anyone who has never heard of or seen them before, but they are nonetheless logically possible and, in fact, they actually exist (294–95). In short: “Tigers exist, lifeboats exist, oceans exist. Because the three have never come together in your [Okamoto’s and Chiba’s] narrow, limited experience, you refuse to believe that they might” (299).

Furthermore, whereas the external verifiable evidence available to Okamoto and Chiba does not justify them in believing that the story with animals is true, neither does it justify them in believing that it is false. The bones of small animals found in Pi’s lifeboat might be from shipboard pests as Okamoto and Chiba claim, either mongooses or rats, but there is also the possibility that they might be meerkat bones, as Pi claims, which would then reinforce Pi’s testimony that he reached a carnivorous island inhabited by meerkats. The interesting point Pi is raising here is that there is no empirically verifiable way for Okamoto and Chiba to determine which way the available evidence points: “It’s doubtful an expert could tell whether they were meerkat bones or mongoose bones” (300).

Once claiming that the story with animals is conceptually possible and so it cannot be discredited beforehand just because of its apparent unlikelihood of being true, Pi formulates his pragmatic argument for defending that the story with animals is *preferable* to the story without animals. He begins by noting that the ultimate facts that are verifiable to Okamoto and Chiba remain the same in both stories: “In both stories the ship sinks, my entire family dies,





and I suffer” (317). However, as I have just said, the few evidence that are empirically verifiable to Okamoto and Chiba are not sufficient to conclude which of the two stories (if any) is the true one—which means that their believing attitude cannot be grounded on an evidential basis: “You can’t prove which story is true and which is not. You must take my word for it” (317). Furthermore, neither of the two stories have enough explanatory power so as to be justified abductively, as an inference to the best explanation, as “[n]either explains the sinking of the *Tsimtsum*” (317). Nonetheless, and despite the fact that neither story “makes a factual difference” (317) to Okamoto and Chiba (that is, they have no personal interest in one story being true and the other being false), they cannot simply suspend their judgment and remain agnostic on this issue as they must write a report on the sinking on behalf of the Japanese authorities. Thus, Okamoto and Chiba *must decide* which story to choose while their decision, as we have seen, cannot be grounded on an evidential, empirical basis.

Given Okamoto’s and Chiba’s lack of empirically verifiable evidence, asking them which of the two stories is *true* would simply make no sense, which is why Pi raises the question of personal preference: “Which story do you prefer? Which is the better story, the story with animals or the story without animals?” (317). Under these terms, once the notion of truth is removed from the question, the answer appears easy. Both stories are full of pain and suffering, and in both Pi faces overwhelmingly difficult and tragic circumstances. But the story without animals is simply a story “short of breath and short of life” (ix). It is a distasteful story that will benefit nobody, a story “that won’t surprise you. That will confirm what you already know. That won’t make you see higher or further or differently. . . . [A] flat story. An immobile story. . . . [of] dry, yeastless, factuality” (302). And preferring the story without animals, just like preferring the atheist’s story over a personal and lovingly religious understanding of the world, is simply to “lack imagination and miss the better story” (64). Hence, the story with animals is not preferable over the story without animals because of it being a more accurate description of what happened during the time Pi was a castaway, but



because of the beneficial consequences it brings to us, mainly that it provides us with new existential and spiritual insights that might make us “see higher or further or differently” (302), and that might thereby facilitate us in attaining a better understanding of ourselves and our own human nature.

We face a similar situation with religion. We must either embrace the religious story or the atheist one, in the same way that Okamoto and Chiba must choose between the story with animals and the story without animals, while which of them we choose is not a matter of empirical, evidential reasoning about whether the world is, in fact, such that God does actually exist or that He does not, but is the result of our personal, subjective decision. This explains Pi’s disdain against agnosticism at the beginning of the novel and his claim that “atheists are my brothers and sisters of a different faith” (28). To prefer an atheist story of the world over a religious one is not an empirical, evidentially grounded position, but a matter of preference and *personal taste*. And the problem with agnosticism is that it simply fails to give an answer where we need an answer, regardless if the answer given is true or not:

It was my first clue that atheists are my brothers and sisters of a different faith, and every word they speak speaks of faith. Like me, they go as far as the legs of reason until carry them—and then they leap. I’ll be honest about it. It is not atheists who get stuck in my craw, but agnostics. Doubt is useful for a while. We must all pass through the garden of Gethsemane. If Christ played with doubt, so must we. If Christ spent an anguished night in prayer, if He burst out from the Cross, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ then surely we are also permitted doubt. But we must move on. To choose doubt as a philosophy of life is akin to choosing immobility as a means of transportation. (28)

As mentioned earlier, if we are to make sense of pragmatic arguments for religious belief, they should not be understood as referring to *religious belief* in the ordinary and common usage of the term, as the acceptance as being true the factual claim that the world is such that God actually exists. Rather, the persuasive force of these arguments appears only when they are understood as referring to a



kind of subjective, non-truth-dependent way of understanding the world and of relating to it. It should be noted that Pi's religious zeal throughout the entire novel reveals this conceiving of religious faith as a loving way of looking at the world and relating to it: "Faith in God is an opening up, a letting go, a deep trust, a free act of love" (208). Thus, nowhere in the novel do we find Pi engaging in theoretical, dogmatic debates regarding the truths of religion—in fact, he explicitly rejects engaging in theological disquisitions: "If you ask me how Brahman and atman relate precisely, I would say in the same way the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit relate: mysteriously" (49). In Chapter 21, after one of his first interviews with (the adult) Pi, Martel neatly summarizes this way of conceiving religious faith:

Words of divine consciousness: moral exaltation; lasting feelings of elevation, elation, joy; a quickening of the moral sense, which strikes one as more important than an intellectual understanding of things; an alignment of the universe along moral lines, not intellectual ones; a realization that the founding principle of existence is what we call love, which works itself out sometimes not clearly, not cleanly, not immediately, nonetheless ineluctably. (63).

This conceiving of religious faith not in terms of truth and factual belief but as becoming immersed in a religious way of life is what is behind Pi's syncretism and what explains his claim that "All religions are true. I just want to love God" (69). Near the beginning of the novel, when Pi and his family have not yet boarded the *Tsimtsum* bound for Canada, Pi explains his discovery and conversions to Christianity and Islam, which occur without losing his Hindu faith. Before commenting on his conversions, it is interesting to note that Pi does not explain his Hindu faith as the result of the empirical verifiable evidence available to him but because of his intimate and subjective feelings: "It is my heart that commands me so. I feel at home in a Hindu temple. I am aware of Presence, not personal the way we usually feel presence, but something larger" (48).

At the age of fourteen, Pi discovers Christianity and converts to it, showing again that his religiosity has nothing to do with a truth-dependent notion of religious belief. Pi does not convert to



Christianity for evidential reasons, because he has found empirically verifiable evidence that conclusively points to the truth regarding the existence of the Christian God. Rather, he converts after discovering and embracing the lovingly, agapeic way of life announced and exemplified by Jesus Christ:

I entered the church without fear this time, for it was now my house too. I offered prayers to Christ, who is alive. I raced down the hill on the left and raced up the hill on the right—to offer thanks to Lord Krishna for having put Jesus of Nazareth, whose humanity I found so compelling, in my way. (58)

A year later, at fifteen years old, Pi discovered Muslim Sufism, a religion “about the Beloved” (60). He is introduced to Islam by a Sufi, who teaches him that the ultimate purpose of Islam is to seek a personal, intimate loving communion with God: “He was a Sufi, a Muslim mystic. He sought fana, union with God, and his relationship with God was personal and loving. ‘If you take two steps towards God,’ he used to tell me, ‘God runs to you!’” (61).

Pi explains his conversion to Islam (which does not result in Pi ceasing to consider himself as either a Hindu or as a Christian) as being the result of what might be considered as a kind of religious experience. Here, again, is his aforementioned non-truth-dependent conception of religious faith. The experience is described as a change in *Pi's* understanding of the world, not as a change in *the* world—that is, the world remains the same, but Pi has changed his subjective way of understanding it. Pi vividly expresses this point:

One such time I left town and on my way back, at a point where the land was high and I could see the sea to my left and down the road a long ways, I suddenly felt I was in heaven. The spot was in fact no different from when I had passed it not long before, but my way of seeing it had changed. The feeling, a paradoxical mix of pulsing energy and profound peace, was intense and blissful. Whereas before the road, the sea, the trees, the air, the sun all spoke differently to me, now they spoke one language of unity. Tree took account of road, which was aware of air, which was mindful of sea, which shared things with sun. Every element lived in harmonious relation with its neighbour, and all was kith and kin. I knelt a mortal; I rose an



immortal. I felt like the centre of a small circle coinciding with the centre of a much large one. Atman met Allah. (62)

The same idea appears in Pi's reflections on the starry sky while he is cast away. The sky and the stars do not appear relevant to Pi in terms of their evidential, theoretical use, so as to provide him with a direction to navigate. Rather, they become relevant only because of the intimate religious feelings of wonder and smallness they awaken in him:

The stars meant nothing to me. I couldn't name a single constellation. My family lived by one star alone: the sun. We were early to bed and early to rise. I had in my life looked at a number of beautiful starry nights, where with just two colours and the simplest of styles nature draws the grandest of pictures, and I felt the feelings of wonder and smallness that we all feel, and I got a clear sense of direction from the spectacle, most definitely, but I mean that in a spiritual sense, not in a geographic one. I hadn't the faintest idea how the night sky might serve as a road map. How could the stars, sparkle as they might, help me find my way if they kept moving? (193)

Last, worthy of mention is the fact that the claim behind Pi's conception of religious faith that the world remains exactly the same but that there is a change in *us*, in our way of seeing and relating to the world, is also present in other non-explicitly religious contexts in *Life of Pi*. Take the following extract:

I did not grasp all these details—and many more—right away. They came to my notice with time and as a result of necessity. I would be in the direct of dire straits, facing a bleak future, when some small thing, some detail, would transform itself and appear in my mind in a new light. It would no longer be the small thing it was before, but the most important thing in the world, the thing that would save my life. This happened time and again. (139)

## Conclusion

In this essay I showed that *Life of Pi* illustrates what philosophers usually name as pragmatic arguments for religious belief. These arguments aim to show that religious belief is justified given the



practical beneficial consequences that religious belief will bring to us. I argue that it is this kind of pragmatic reasoning that makes preferable Pi's story with animals over his story without animals. I also point out that these arguments appear more convincing if they are not understood as referring to belief in the ordinary and common usage of the term, as the acceptance as being true the factual claim that the world is such that God does actually exist, but as referring to a subjective, non-truth-dependent way of understanding the world and of relating to it. This is precisely the kind of conception of religious faith that is illustrated by the character of Pi through the novel.

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