



Pragmatic and Transcendental Arguments for Theism: a Critical Examination

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Abstract. Commenting upon some recent literature on the topic, this paper examines two strategies by means of which one might try to defend theism: (1) a *pragmatic* (Jamesian) strategy, which focuses on the idea that religious belief has beneficial consequences in the believer's life, and (2) a *transcendental* (Kantian) strategy, according to which theism is required as a condition of our self-understanding as ethically oriented creatures. Both strategies are found unsatisfactory, unless synthesized and thus supported by each other. While no argument, either pragmatic or transcendental, can demonstrate the existence of God, a pragmatic transcendental argument might have a legitimate role to play in the philosophy of religion. The problem of relativism arises, however. It is concluded that it remains unclear whether a religious believer could justify her or his beliefs to anyone who does not already share those beliefs.

1. Introduction

The contrast between *evidentialism* and *fideism* has been one of the central oppositions in recent philosophy of religion. I am not going to define these notions here; for our purposes, it is sufficient to note that evidentialists, engaging in something like “natural theology”, urge that religious beliefs (in particular, the belief that God exists) ought to be supported by religiously neutral evidence, reason and argument, whereas fideists, renouncing the project of natural theology, argue that the evidentialist's requirement misconstrues the nature of religious belief, which, if genuinely religious, is held without evidence, reason or argument. Thus, evidentialism subscribes to the maxim that all beliefs, religious beliefs included, ought to be evaluated by the very same standards of rationality (presumably ultimately scientific ones), while fideism insists on the sharp distinction between faith and reason, pointing out that religious beliefs do not need rational standards of acceptance and can thus be neither supported by evidence nor attacked because of their lack of evidence. Fideists are almost always religious believers, but evidentialists include both theists like Richard Swinburne and atheists like J.L. Mackie or Kai Nielsen.¹

Both evidentialism and fideism, at least in their extreme forms, seem to be unsatisfactory. Fideists, I take it, are right to point out against evidentialists that in many cases of genuine religious belief evidence and argument are entirely irrelevant. Neither believers nor non-believers are convinced by the classical “proofs” of God’s existence; nor need they, say, accept Swinburne’s cumulative inductive argument for the probability of the theistic hypothesis in order to adopt and maintain religious faith. Furthermore, the problem of evil seems to be an efficient atheological argument only for those who already are atheists. A religious person more naturally sees evil as God’s mysterious secret – we humans, after all, cannot ethically judge God, as Job realized after God had spoken to him. For a suffering believer, such as Job, God’s existence or non-existence is simply not an issue to be investigated through philosophical arguments.² On the other hand, evidentialists are, in my view, right to argue against fideists that if faith and reason are totally separated, little remains from the possibility of rational, critical philosophical discussion of religion. Rational discussion of religious matters is, after all, also an element of our Western theological traditions themselves. Although religious issues are different from scientific or intellectual ones, they do set us intellectual challenges, too. Fideism leads to extreme subjectivism or relativism, according to which religion cannot be critically evaluated at all. It is, therefore, hardly surprising that philosophers of religion should seek middle paths between the evidentialist and fideist extremes in the discussion of the relation between reason and faith.

The tradition of *pragmatism*, whose most important classical figure from the perspective of the philosophy of religion was undoubtedly William James, is one such middle-ground option, and it seems that this tradition is gaining new vitality in philosophy in general and in the philosophy of religion in particular, partly thanks to the recent work of Hilary Putnam and other neopragmatists.³ Drawing attention to human practices – in this case, to the plurality of ways in which religious belief can be practically relevant to people living amidst their problems of life – pragmatism seeks to overcome the artificial tension between evidentialism and fideism, arguing that religious belief does not need supporting evidence in the sense in which scientific theories need such evidence but it can nevertheless be “tested” and thus rationally defended, not in a scientific research laboratory, nor by means of *a priori* philosophical demonstration, but, to use Putnam’s apt phrase, in the “laboratory of life”.⁴ Religious belief may, in some cases at least, be pragmatically rational for individual human beings, although no general philosophical proof of its rationality can be given.

The present essay is not an historical treatment of the resources of pragmatism to deal with the reason vs. faith tension, nor a comparison

between pragmatism and other recent approaches in some ways close to pragmatism, such as the so-called reformed epistemologists' (Alvin Plantinga, Nicholas Wolterstorff, William P. Alston) appeal to the rationality of Christian believers' actual doxastic practices in their defense of theistic belief.⁵ Rather, I shall critically explore the possibility of combining pragmatic and Kantian-styled "transcendental" arguments in favor of theism. Far from defending either theism or atheism (or evidentialism or fideism), I shall try to say something about the conceptual background conditions that any such pragmatic (and/or transcendental) defense should be able to meet and about the problems that need to be faced if one adopts such an approach. It will emerge, among other things, that a pragmatic discussion of the rationality of religious belief is in interesting ways connected with some controversial "Wittgensteinian" trends in the philosophy of religion, as well as with the issue of realism vs. anti-realism as applied to religious language, although these topics cannot be treated in any detailed fashion in a short paper like this. While I shall critically scrutinize only two specific examples of pragmatic and transcendental arguments, my discussion is more generally intended as an analysis of the resources of these argumentative strategies in contemporary philosophy of religion.

2. Arguing pragmatically

A straightforward pragmatic argument for God's existence has recently been offered by L. Stafford Betty.⁶ This is how it goes:

1. For any two sets of beliefs R and S [e.g., religious and secular], which cannot both be true, if R produces more good for those who accept R than S does for those who accept S (all other things being equal), then R is more likely true than S.
2. More good comes to people living out of a set of religious beliefs R that foster tolerance, especially including a generic understanding of divine reality, than out of an opposing set of purely secular beliefs S.
3. Therefore, R is more likely true than S.⁷

Betty refers to William James' discussion of the goods of saintliness and mysticism,⁸ but it is tempting to see the argument as a version of James's well-known "will to believe" argument.⁹ Unlike James, for whom truth is a pragmatic notion, characterized in terms of satisfaction and workability, Betty endorses the standard correspondence account of truth and simply supports the first premise by empirical cases that allegedly make it seem that "the closer to the truth a belief is, the more likely some good will come out of it".¹⁰ The second premise is supported by the alleged social-scientific evidence that demonstrates a "correlation between life satisfaction

and health on the one hand, and religiously on the other”, “between religiosity and well-being”.¹¹ The argument then goes through, provided that it is modified by restricting it to “generic” and tolerant religious beliefs which do not encourage idiosyncracies and exclusivism.¹²

Betty’s argument, pragmatically appealing as it might look, is as a matter of fact a crude vulgarization of Jamesian pragmatism: it appears as though the religiously inclined thinker should *first* evaluate the sociological and other external evidence we have for the benefits of religious belief in human life, and *only then* decide whether to believe or not! On the contrary, James explicitly urged that faith should already be a “genuine option” for the one whom we can take to be believing religiously. In order to apply the pragmatic will to believe, the choice between rival positions which one faces – whether religious or non-religious positions – must be undecidable on purely evidential or intellectual grounds and satisfy three further requirements: it must be (1) “living” (i.e., both hypotheses, such as theism and atheism, must be “live” ones for the one who decides whether to believe or not), (2) “forced” (i.e., one cannot avoid deciding, as there is no “third way”), as well as (3) “momentous” (i.e., a unique and non-trivial chance).¹³ In such cases, James argued, we face our personal risk of error but also the possibility of getting things right – whether we believe, deny, or doubt.¹⁴ It is in such cases that “our passional nature” or the “whole man” in us is in action and may legitimately choose whether to believe or not, in the absence of purely intellectual or evidentialist considerations. Obviously, it is to a great extent a matter of our cultural background, historical situation, and education which religious or other *weltanschaulich* options are genuinely available for us, although the availability of such options may and does gradually change as our life circumstances change.

A somewhat similar though not exactly the same theme has been developed, in addition to James, by several followers of Wittgenstein, e.g., Peter Winch and D.Z. Phillips in their numerous writings on religious belief and religious language.¹⁵ According to these thinkers, whom I cannot here discuss in any detail, religious beliefs are not maintained (or given up) because of intellectual reasons. It would be a vulgar violation of the very idea of believing religiously, and of the ways in which religious people use religious language, to suggest that one could first, “pragmatically”, consider the external (e.g., social-scientific) evidence there is for the beneficial effects of religious life, and then choose one’s belief in the light of such evidence. It would be equally vulgar to choose theism because it is (if Betty’s argument is correct) more probably true than its secular rival; for a religious person, God’s existence is *certain* rather than probable or improbable.¹⁶ This amounts to saying that believers believe for *religious* reasons. The pragmatic utility or goodness of their faith is internal to that faith itself. Both Wittgensteinians and

pragmatists may insist that it is unfair to reduce believers' religious reasons to any set of non-religious, external benefits that religiousness might bring to their lives. To do so would be to seriously distort the nature of genuine religious belief – to turn it into a banal means-ends utility calculation.

Betty's pragmatic argument can, I think, be compared to a placebo effect. Suppose I believe that, generally, placebo effects are real, that is, that in many cases someone struck by an illness will get better if she or he firmly believes in the efficiency of the treatment or drug she or he enjoys, even though that treatment or drug is known to be medically inefficient. Now, if I – in my own case – do not believe that a certain therapy or drug will cure my own illness (because I know, for scientific, medical reasons, that there is no causal connection between that therapy and the cause of the illness), could I simply “will to believe” that I will be cured, in order to make the placebo effect (which I do believe to be a genuine possibility in many cases) work in my own case, to render my recovery more probable? Or would this result in an incoherent belief system? It seems to me that the idea that religious belief amounts to a kind of placebo is a violation of James's will to believe principle: the belief that the therapy or drug will help me is not originally a live option for me, because I start from a scientific conception of the world according to which no such help in this case is available; the appeal to the placebo effect is, then, *external* to my doxastic concerns. This kind of placebo-based reasoning would be as hopeless, from a Jamesian point of view, as Pascal's wager, in which one's belief in God is compared to a kind of bet.¹⁷ I cannot (coherently) just adopt the belief that I will be cured, in order to strengthen my likelihood of being cured, if that belief is not originally a live option for me in the Jamesian sense.¹⁸

Moreover, external, scientific explanations of religious life (belief, experience, ritual, etc.) may also lead to the view that belief in *falsehoods* (say, in God's existence, if God does not exist) may have been useful and evolutionarily advantageous for cognitive agents.¹⁹ It is arbitrary simply to seek social-scientific evidence for the convergence of utility and truth (as Betty does); we should also give due consideration to all contrary evidence for the convergence of utility and falsehood. Since neither kind of evidence is clearly superior to the other, I am tempted to conclude that these external, naturalized treatments of religious belief and its value in human life, either *pro* or *contra*, are essentially *irrelevant* from the point of view of the individual religious believer.²⁰

Pragmatically, it is advisable to turn, instead of either social-scientific or cognitive-scientific or psychological or evolutionary accounts, to first-person reports of religious experiences and thoughts, such as the one given by no one else than Wittgenstein: occasionally, he informs us, he might experience being “absolutely safe”, i.e., being convinced that, whatever happens,

it cannot harm him.²¹ Conversely, of course, there is also the possibility of experiencing absolute guilt and threat, of feeling absolutely guilty, vulnerable, insecure, and threatened. But experiences like the one of absolute safety are *pragmatically* significant in people's lives; these internal experiences, rather than any external goods of life, are the true fruits of religious belief (just as they may, for some people, be the fruits of atheism or materialism). To explain such ineffable experiences – either positive or negative ones – scientifically is to change the subject, to reduce the experiences themselves away to mere external (e.g., placebo) effects that certain beliefs might have for their holders.

Now, the problem, in both James and Wittgenstein (and their followers like Putnam) is precisely this ineffability, mysticism, incommunicability. Can we really discuss, philosophically or otherwise, the true pragmatic core of religious belief, experiences such as the one Wittgenstein described? Insofar as pragmatism avoids the crudeness of Betty's straightforward theistic argument, as Putnam, for instance, certainly does, it will be as problematic to describe the content of religious faith to a non-believer as it is to describe it from the Wittgensteinian (allegedly "fideistic") point of view.²² Accordingly, the difficulties that non-vulgar versions of pragmatist philosophy of religion confront are pretty much the same as the ones that need to be faced in the Wittgensteinian framework. The worry, in brief, is that *if* one adopts a mystifying stance in one's account of the (possible) value of religion in one's life – even if it happens for a respectable anti-reductionist reason, as a result of one's willingness to maintain a perspective on the "internal", religious value of religious faith, instead of reducing the value of such faith to something non-religious and allegedly more fundamental – then one may lose one's resources to go on discussing religious topics critically and rationally at all.

3. Arguing transcendently

In this argumentative deadlock, some help might be found by focusing more deeply on the idea that the genuine pragmatic outcome of religious (or other) beliefs in people's lives is internal to those beliefs or belief-systems rather than external to them. This feature of pragmatism – that we should argue *from within* our doxastic practices (religious, scientific, and moral practices alike) – brings pragmatism closer to Kantian transcendental inquiry than is usually acknowledged.²³ Just as the Kantian transcendental inquirer starts from human experience itself in order to establish its *a priori* conditions of possibility, the pragmatic inquirer starts from the actuality of religious life itself, seeking to ground its conditions in the practices that believers engage in. Similarly, Wittgensteinian philosophers of religion begin from

actual religious practices and rituals, such as prayer, rather than any abstract philosophical considerations of their rationality.

As an example of a transcendental argument for theism, i.e., for the existence of God (and, specifically, God's grace) as an indispensable presupposition of our moral lives, we may take a look at Charles Taylor's argument, as analyzed in a recent essay by D.P. Baker.²⁴ First, however, some terminological issues must be settled. The notion of a transcendental argument, as is well known, goes back to Immanuel Kant, whose "transcendental deduction" of the pure concepts or categories of understanding (e.g., causality) is usually taken to be a model of transcendental arguments. In such arguments, something (such as the categories) is shown to be a necessary precondition for the possibility of something that we take as given or unproblematic (such as cognitive experience of objects). While these arguments, in Kant and in more modern writers, are often interpreted as intending to refute skepticism, they do not stand or fall with this anti-skeptical project. They can be construed more broadly as arguments investigating *how* we are committed, in our lives and practices, to certain concepts, such as the concepts of rule-following (Wittgenstein) or causality (Kant), which may be seen as conditions for the possibility of meaningful language or cognitive experience, respectively. Thus, a pragmatic reinterpretation of the transcendental strategy of argumentation is available (or so I will claim in what follows), although mainstream discussion of these matters today still understands transcendental arguments as inherently epistemological and anti-skeptical.²⁵

A historical note is needed at this point, before we take a closer look at Taylor's (and Baker's) transcendental argument. While we may say that Kant invented transcendental arguments, he did not actually apply such arguments in theology. For Kant, transcendental arguments, such as the famous deduction or the "Refutation of Idealism", were designed to show how certain things are required as preconditions of humanly possible experience. God, if he exists, falls outside humanly possible experience. No argument, transcendental or otherwise, can entitle our belief in God in the way in which we are entitled to believe in causality, for instance, or in the forms of pure intuition, space and time. According to Kant, we simply cannot know, either *a priori* or *a posteriori*, that God exists; God is neither an object of possible experience nor a transcendental presupposition of the possibility of experience. Yet, Kant famously wanted to restrict the scope of knowledge in order to make room for faith,²⁶ and regarded God's existence as a "postulate of practical reason" required in his moral philosophy.²⁷ As Kant argues in his Second Critique, morality requires that we aim at the Highest Good, or *summum bonum*, and thus pursue the happiness of those who obey the moral law – even though happiness itself can by no means be an ethical motive for our actions. Since such happiness and thus the Highest Good are not guaranteed for ethical

persons in the empirical world of appearances, we need to “postulate” God’s existence (along with freedom and the immortality of the soul) in order to account for our moral pursuit itself. God will, we are entitled to hope, ultimately reward those who act purely on the grounds of their respect for the moral law.

This might be labeled a transcendental argument, although in Kant’s own terms it is not one. Although God’s existence is, in Kant’s view, in a sense a condition for the possibility of moral life as we experience it, we cannot know that God exists. The argument for God’s existence as a postulate of practical reason does not yield knowledge; its epistemic status is thus different from the conclusions of the transcendental arguments offered in Kant’s theoretical philosophy, which are taken to be indubitable. It is also worth noting that Kant says explicitly that we should not resort to transcendental arguments in theology. It has been widely believed that Kant himself never used the term “transcendental argument” – and that it is a modern invention, introduced only in the twentieth century, gaining wider usage in the literature following Strawson’s seminal work, *Individuals*²⁸ – but this is not true. There is one passage in the First Critique in which the term occurs,²⁹ and the context is interesting from the perspective of the philosophy of religion. In his attack on what he calls the “physico-theological” proof of God’s existence – what we would call the “argument from design” – Kant says that the purposiveness and harmony of nature can only prove the contingency of the *form* of the world, not of the substance or *matter* of the world (and thus the need for a creator); to prove the latter we would have to prove “that the things in the world would not of themselves be capable of such order and harmony, in accordance with universal laws, if they were not *in their substance* the product of supreme wisdom”. But we can at most prove that there has been an “architect”, not that there has been a creator. This is insufficient for proving “an all-sufficient primordial being”. And he concludes: “To prove the contingency of matter itself, we should have to resort to a transcendental argument, and this is precisely what we have here set out to avoid.”³⁰

The “transcendental argument” for the existence of God that Baker finds in Taylor’s defense of moral realism in *Sources of the Self* is, then, not strictly speaking Kantian, because for Kant such arguments are impossible in the theological case, but it does bear resemblance to the general model of transcendental argumentation we may naturally adopt from Kant. Surely Taylor does not argue that God’s existence is a necessary presupposition of the possibility of cognitive experience; as Kant’s, his theistic argument is restricted to the sphere of morality. So in Kant’s terms we can say that he does not prove God’s existence. But this is hardly surprising. No one should today dream of the possibility of giving a deductive philosophical proof for theism in such a manner that atheists would become convinced and

turn into believers; Kant's (as well as Hume's) arguments against ontological, cosmological and design proofs are so powerful that the prospects of infallibly demonstrating the existence of God look dim indeed. Taylor's argument, though transcendental, does not lead to an indubitable conclusion about God's necessary existence. But it is an argument focusing on our need to postulate God in order to account for our moral experience. Thus, it provides a case study of transcendental argument which is not logically conclusive but may nevertheless illuminate important interconnections between some central concepts we use to structure our lives or lifeworld.³¹

In Baker's formulation, which I shall focus on here, Taylor's argument can be reconstructed as follows:

1. We are essentially subjects.
2. It is essential to our manner of being as subjects that we perceive the world in moral terms.
3. It is essential to a moral outlook that it take a "hypergood perspective".
4. It is the nature of a hypergood that it orders and shapes other goods into a framework.
5. We are therefore beings whose experience is defined by a moral framework which is dominated by a hypergood.³²

In brief, then, Taylor (in Baker's view) argues that insofar as we are subjects or agents, which is something that we must take as given, we are inevitably committed to a moral framework in which one or another "hypergood" is operative. Such commitment is, humanly speaking, inescapable. In a word, "it is essential to our manner of being as subjects that we perceive the world in moral terms".³³ That this view is (though largely implicitly) based on a transcendental argument can clearly be seen, for instance, from the following statement by Taylor: "[D]oing without frameworks is utterly impossible for us; [. . .] the horizons within which we live our lives and which make sense of them have to include these strong qualitative discriminations. [. . .] [L]iving within such strongly qualified horizons is constitutive of human agency, [. . .] stepping outside these limits would be tantamount to stepping outside what we would recognize as integral, that is, undamaged human personhood."³⁴

Now, Baker suggests that this general transcendental argument must, according to Taylor, be further supported by a specific transcendental argument. Here we finally end up with the theistic proposal. For Taylor (according to Baker), theism provides the "best account" of the goods we find indispensable to our moral experience.³⁵ The general transcendental argument according to which a moral framework dominated by a "hypergood" is an inescapable feature of our moral experience relies on the following more specific argument:

1. It is indispensable to our moral framework that it include certain specific goods, which can be orientated to and described in differing ways (for example, 'grace' [...]).
2. It is the Best Account of these goods that they be understood as part of a theistic account. That is, once the [...] goods are clearly articulated, it is indispensable to a Best Account of those goods that they be described in theistic terms.³⁶

However, Baker finds Taylor's argument wanting, because transcendental arguments ought to be indubitable and there is undeniably still room for doubt in the theistic indispensability claim. Taylor does not, it seems, give us a sufficient rational reason for believing in God, and hence his argument is not apodictically certain. The transcendental reasoning Taylor engages in simply fails to show that the existence of a hypergood (such as God's grace) is really indispensable to our moral experience. At best, Baker seems to be saying, Taylor may succeed in showing that we need to believe in God in order to account for the phenomenology of our moral experience; he cannot show that our belief must be true. It is quite obviously one thing to claim that we cannot help believing that *p* and another thing to claim that our belief that *p* accurately represents the facts, or the way the world is independently of our beliefs.³⁷

4. Synthesizing pragmatic and transcendental arguments

What should we make of this? Are there any prospects for supplying a transcendental reinterpretation of pragmatic argumentation, or *vice versa*, and for applying such a reinterpreted argument to the theistic case? As Baker argues, Taylor's transcendental argument, if understood as aiming at an indubitable true conclusion, does not succeed. It is, as all such arguments, circular.³⁸ But it is precisely at this point that our investigation makes a full circle: the circularity of transcendental argumentation need not worry us, if we construe these arguments in a pragmatic fashion, running together transcendental and abductive (pragmatically explanatory or elucidatory) arguments, as well as the ontological and epistemic status of transcendental arguments.³⁹ In fact, transcendental arguments can only get going if we follow Kant in rejecting the split between the ontological and epistemic conclusions to be drawn from such arguments, or the corresponding split between arguments designed to establish the *truth* of their conclusion and those merely designed to establish our inescapable *need to believe* the conclusion. This is also a Jamesian move: if it is humanly inescapable, as a precondition of moral experience, to believe in God, then that belief is *ipso facto* pragmatically true for us.⁴⁰ The notion of truth is, in Jamesian prag-

matism, “humanized”: there is no higher perspective available for us on the truth or falsity of any belief than a perspective lying within the commitments of our best, most critical and self-reflective practice.

Consequently, *if* Taylor succeeds in showing that we really have to believe in God’s existence in order to account for the source of “hypergoods” we find inevitable in our self-image as moral agents, then, if we are also prepared to follow James’s pragmatism, we cannot but regard God’s existence as a pragmatically true postulate for us. This is of course quite different from proving God’s existence demonstratively, but Taylor’s argument is hardly meant to be demonstrative in the sense in which the classical theistic proofs were meant to be. On the contrary, it is much closer to Kant’s above-discussed way of deriving theism, as a postulate of practical reason, from the rationally binding nature of the moral imperative (rather than the other way around).

Indeed, if we synthesize pragmatic and transcendental arguments, as I am here suggesting we should do, then Kant’s own pragmatic argument, which in any case makes theism a presuppositional necessity from the point of view of morality (which we treat as given, unless we are moral skeptics), will turn out to be a transcendental argument in this more flexibly construed sense. *Pace* Kant himself, transcendental arguments thus defined do have a legitimate use in theology, more specifically moral theology – following Kant’s own example. But this redefinition of the notion of a transcendental argument requires that we are willing to soften the requirement of the indubitability of the conclusions of such arguments. The transcendental principles that can be established through transcendental reasoning are certain or indubitable or apodictic only *contextually*, only, say, in a certain historical and cultural setting in which people find certain beliefs or the use of certain concepts inevitable. This amounts to something like a “relativized *a priori*”, which has been a major topic in post-Kantian discussions of the nature of *a priori* principles, especially in the twentieth century.

It is important to see that pragmatically reconstructed transcendental arguments are *not* intended as refutations of skepticism, either in the theistic case or more generally. As Baker’s criticism of Taylor’s transcendental argumentation shows, it is impossible to conclusively refute the skeptic in the theistic case. Transcendental arguments (like Taylor’s or Kant’s own) proceeding to the theistic conclusion *via* considerations of morality leave their conclusion inadequately supported from the point of view of the skeptic, who can of course also adopt moral skepticism, refusing to treat our moral orientation as “given” in the way in which Kant and Taylor treat it as given.⁴¹ One may even point out that it is hopeless to overcome either moral or religious skepticism by means of a transcendental, or any, argument, because morality, pretty much like religion, requires something like faith and is thus essentially fragile and vulnerable – something one can lose, though not usually

as a result of an argument.⁴² In this sense, transcendental arguments are *internal* to the practices the moral agent or the religious believer is already engaging in, i.e., internal to practices within which the skeptical threat does not arise at all. These arguments, non-skeptically rather than anti-skeptically reinterpreted, can only secure our need to maintain certain beliefs or to use certain concepts insofar as we go on engaging in the practices we actually do engage in, practices from which the arguments themselves begin and gain their significance.⁴³

I would even like to go one step further and propose that we see a deep structural analogy between pragmatically reconstructed transcendental arguments and Jamesian will to believe arguments.⁴⁴ This proposal may sound shocking, since few philosophers have regarded these argumentative strategies as even remotely related to each other. But it is clear that both begin from our human condition and take for granted certain given features of our human experience, something that cannot be grounded, justified, or legitimized in any foundationalist manner. Kantian transcendental arguments would not be effective against a thoroughgoing Humean skeptic, who could always ask why it should not be the case that our experiences fragmentate into an unstructured rhapsody of unrelated sense impressions, yielding no coherent experience of objects at all. Similarly, the Jamesian will to believe strategy would be ineffective in a situation in which people simply did not have any religious needs or religious experiences (or religious traditions built on those needs and experiences) any longer. Just as transcendental arguments proceed from the actuality of a given phenomenon “backwards” to the necessary conditions for the possibility of that phenomenon, the will to believe strategy also moves backwards to the legitimation of the religious experience which, in turn, makes it possible for the believer to see the question concerning God’s existence as a genuine option for her or him, a “live” and “momentous” situation of existential choice, in which the employment of a will to believe is possible. In neither case does the argument prove anything to the radical skeptic who is not already committed to the experiential and/or cultural-traditional (*lebensformlich*) background that makes the argument applicable.

5. Concluding remarks

There is *some* hope in offering a pragmatic-cum-transcendental argument for a theistic world-view as a presupposition of our moral lives in a Jamesian or Kantian-Taylorian manner, but such an argument must, as we have seen, be considered fallible and only contextually binding, as all pragmatic arguments must. There is, then, no point in trying to “prove” God’s existence from a

philosophical point of view lying outside religious life itself. Elaborating on this insight is where Wittgensteinian philosophers of religion, among others, have done a great job. But if we come, in the end, back to their (e.g., Phillips's) views, do we end up with fideism? Such questions will ultimately remain open here. We have at any rate come very close to the thesis that theism cannot be rationally demonstrated or even defended to an unbeliever or skeptic at all. Insofar as any arguments, pragmatic or transcendental or both, can be given, their relevant audience will already have to be committed to theism.

Such a conception of the resources of transcendental arguments in a pragmatist setting is not only contextualized – it is straightforwardly *relativistic*.⁴⁵ Just like in Plantinga's and Alston's anti-evidentialist reformed epistemology or "Christian philosophy", or in Phillips's Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion (albeit in quite different ways),⁴⁶ the relevant philosophical audience consists of people already sharing the religious faith whose warrant is to be philosophically examined, instead of consisting of unbelievers to whom a defense of such warrant is directed. As Plantinga has put it, Christian (theistic) belief is probably warranted if it is true, and thus warranted for those who hold it to be true (given that it can be legitimately held as a "basic belief" not in need of evidential support), because if God exists he could hardly have created an improperly functioning cognitive mechanism which would lead us astray in such an important matter as the truth of theism.⁴⁷ It is extremely doubtful whether anyone else than a committed Christian (or, more specifically, Calvinist) will find this reasoning of much relevance in the debate over the warrant of theism. Analogously, no one initially convinced, say, of the atheological force of the problem of evil will be impressed by a pragmatic and/or transcendental theistic argument appealing to the need to believe in God even in a horrendously evil world as something that makes sense of our pragmatic need to find personal meaning in our lives.⁴⁸

Thus, Baker is in a sense right. Taylor cannot succeed in proving God's existence by means of a transcendental argument drawn on the requirements of moral realism – nor can any other transcendental inquirer, even Kant himself. But I have pointed out that in a more flexible, contextualized and historically sensitive sense, transcendental arguments (for theism or for any other philosophical thesis) are not entirely irrelevant, and contemporary philosophers of religion, both pragmatists and non-pragmatists, ignore them at their own peril. Within a practice, field of commitments, or (as Wittgensteinians would put it) a form of life, they may have an important role to play in an elucidation of the relations between the concepts employed and the commitments made. For a certain kind of moral outlook, theism may turn out to be a necessary pragmatic precondition. This *may* even be the case with our, modern Westerners', moral outlook – but on the other hand it may not. Transcendental arguments, when pragmatized, must be tied to, or relativized

to, the practice-laden context in which they are understood as effective and relevant to human experience. Otherwise there is for them no practical work to do. Certainly this transcendental pragmatism is very different from Betty's externalized pragmatic argument for theism which was criticized in some detail above.

To avoid full-blown relativism, we can – as believers or non-believers – do little more than self-critically examine the commitments we have made and are making in the course of our lives, in order to pragmatically reshape them into a more responsible pattern. This is, obviously, an endless task, and its endlessness highlights the similarities of the problems that pragmatist and Wittgensteinian philosophers of religion will have to face in their attempts to take seriously the *Lebensform*-embeddedness of religious options and faith, while renouncing uncritical relativism. *Pace* Betty and some other new pragmatists, there is, then, much more complexity to be found in the pragmatic dynamics between our needs, commitments, beliefs, and experiences than any simple appeal to the benefits of certain beliefs can reveal. A pragmatist who focuses on genuine, “live” options in a Jamesian manner, can expect some help – but only limited help – from Kantian or Taylorian transcendental argumentation.

Such a pragmatist should not, however, endorse total relativism or a “Christian philosophy” whose arguments are warrantedly available only to a group of elected (or divinely inspired) few, because in order to make a will to believe choice, she or he must, as it were, view the option as a genuine one. For the one who is transcendentially or pragmatically committed to theism, atheism ought to remain a live option, too. Accordingly, we end up with an instability in our doxastic and *weltanschaulich* lives: in order to argue for theism, we would have to live a believer's life already, but we should not be too strongly committed in order to keep our life argumentative and intellectually responsible. I have not, then, been able to show that there is a stable pragmatist middle position between evidentialism and fideism. But nor am I, fortunately, forced to conclude that the search for such a position is necessarily futile.⁴⁹

Notes

1. Instead of citing these well-known philosophers' works in any detail in this essay, I just refer the reader to a highly useful recent discussion of the evidentialism vs. fideism contrast, as well as other central epistemological and methodological issues in late-twentieth-century Anglo-American philosophy of religion: see Timo Koistinen, *Philosophy of Religion or Religious Philosophy? A Critical Study of Contemporary Anglo-American Approaches* (Helsinki: Luther-Agricola Society, 2000).
2. Cf. here John T. Wilcox, *The Bitterness of Job: A Philosophical Reading* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1989/1992).

3. For an evaluation of the relevance of pragmatist (especially Jamesian) philosophy of religion, see Sami Pihlström, *Pragmatism and Philosophical Anthropology: Understanding Our Human Life in a Human World* (New York: Peter Lang, 1998), chs. 5–6. For a critical discussion of Putnam’s neopragmatist (and Wittgensteinian) ideas concerning religious belief, see Sami Pihlström, “Hilary Putnam as a Religious Thinker”, *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 11:1 (1999), pp. 39–60. Putnam’s pragmatism or pragmatic realism has recently been applied in the philosophy of religion by Eberhard Herrmann: see his papers, “Realism, Semantics and Religion”, in Timo Koistinen and Tommi Lehtonen (eds.), *Philosophical Studies in Religion, Metaphysics, and Ethics: Essays in Honour of Heikki Kirjavainen* (Helsinki: Luther-Agricola Society, 1997), pp. 77–94; and “A Pragmatic Realist Philosophy of Religion” (paper presented at the symposium, *Philosophy of Religion as Philosophy: What It Is?*, University of Helsinki, October 2001). On the other hand, pragmatism is almost entirely absent from mainstream discussions of the issue of reason and faith and of the contrast between evidentialism and fideism. The absence of articles on pragmatism is striking in otherwise highly useful recent anthologies such as Eleonore Stump and Michael J. Murray (eds.), *Philosophy of Religion: The Big Questions* (Oxford and Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999) and Brian Davies (ed.), *Philosophy of Religion: A Guide and Anthology* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). More popular middle paths include “soft rationalism” (represented by William J. Abraham, among others) and reformed epistemology (cf. Koistinen, *Philosophy of Religion or Religious Philosophy?*, cited above in note 1).
4. Hilary Putnam, “God and the Philosophers”, in Peter A. French, Theodor E. Uehling, Jr., and Howard K. Wettstein (eds.), *Philosophy of Religion* (Midwest Studies in Philosophy 21, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp. 175–187; see p. 182. Issues in the philosophy of religion are virtually absent from Putnam’s major works; see, however, also his papers, “On Negative Theology”, *Faith and Philosophy* 14 (1997), pp. 407–422; “Thoughts Addressed to an Analytical Thomist”, *The Monist* 80 (1997), pp. 487–499; and “Reply to Jean-Pierre Cometti”, *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 4/2001, pp. 457–469. (The latter piece is a response to Jean-Pierre Cometti, “Putnam, Wittgenstein sur la croyance religieuse”, *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 4/2001, pp. 439–455, an essay examining the Wittgensteinian orientation of Putnam’s philosophy of religion.)
5. See again Koistinen, *Philosophy of Religion or Religious Philosophy?* (op. cit.); I shall, however, make a few critical remarks on the problems common to the pragmatist approach and “Christian philosophy” in the final section of this paper.
6. L. Stafford Betty, “Going beyond James: A Pragmatic Argument for God’s Existence”, *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 49 (2001), pp. 69–84.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 69, 79.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 70. See William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (ed. by Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis, Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1985; first published 1902).
9. See William James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (ed. by Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis, Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1979; first published 1897).
10. Betty, “Going beyond James” (op. cit.), p. 73.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 75.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 77–81.
13. James, *The Will to Believe* (op. cit.), pp. 14–15.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 19–20, 32–33, 79–80. For a discussion of this element of James’s thought, see Pihlström, *Pragmatism and Philosophical Anthropology* (op. cit.), ch. 6. One of the best

- recent treatments of James's will to believe doctrine as a pragmatic theory of rationality is Henry Jackman, "Prudential Arguments, Naturalized Epistemology, and the Will to Believe", *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 35 (1999), pp. 1–37.
15. Cf., e.g., D.Z. Phillips, *Belief, Change and Forms of Life* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1986), and Peter Winch, *Trying to Make Sense* (Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1987).
 16. Wittgensteinian thinkers elaborating on this idea usually heavily rely on Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* (trans. Denis Paul and G.E.M. Anscombe, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1969).
 17. For James' rejection of Pascal's wager, along with W.K. Clifford's evidentialism, see *The Will to Believe* (op. cit.), pp. 15–18. It should be noted, though, that Pascal's actual position is more complex than the one described here, insofar as he suggested that one might deliberately adopt a regimen in order to produce, eventually, genuine belief (instead of just directly adopting the theistic belief itself).
 18. James himself rejected extreme doxastic voluntarism by reasonably reminding us that he could not just will to believe that the sum of the two dollar bills in his pocket equals to a hundred dollars (ibid., pp. 15–16). It seems to me that Betty's pragmatic argument, insofar as it is supposed to be available to initial unbelievers, would be an equally hopeless exercise in a kind of voluntarism that James abandoned *expressis verbis*.
 19. Cf. Stewart Guthrie, "Why Gods? A Cognitive Theory", in Jensine Andresen (ed.), *Religion in Mind: Cognitive Perspectives in Religious Belief, Ritual, and Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 94–111. Guthrie points out, among other things, that the tendency to judge (mistakenly) "the inanimate to be alive and the nonhuman to be human" has been evolutionarily useful, and is thus scientifically explainable, because obviously "it is better to mistaken something unimportant for something important [...] than the other way around" (p. 99). This kind of a cognitive theory of religion explains religious ontological postulations by non-religious reasons and is thus reductionist.
 20. This conclusion can be generalized to the suggestion that the kind of naturalist and reductionist (e.g., cognitive-scientific) accounts of religion that are designed to explain religious thought and experiences in essentially non-religious terms (cf. here several papers in the volume mentioned in the previous note, Andresen, ed., *Religion in Mind*) are largely irrelevant from the believers' point of view. This is not to deny the great scientific value of such theories.
 21. Ludwig Wittgenstein, "Lecture on Ethics" (1929), *Philosophical Review* 74 (1965), pp. 3–16. For a profound ethical interpretation of the idea that "nothing can harm a good man", see Winch, *Trying to Make Sense* (op. cit.).
 22. For an argument to the effect that Putnam in the end arrives at religious mysticism, see Pihlström, "Hilary Putnam as a Religious Thinker" (op. cit.). This result certainly has much to do with his Wittgensteinian orientation.
 23. Here, again, we may note that – as the importance of the notion of a doxastic practice suggests – pragmatism is in some ways close to reformed epistemology, whose advocates argue that some "basic belief" (e.g., theism) may be a rationally grounded basic belief, not in need of evidential support, in one doxastic practice (e.g., the Christian theist's practice) while failing to be in such a position in some other practices. Yet, reformed epistemologists like Plantinga differ from both pragmatism and transcendental philosophy by interpreting theistic belief in a straightforwardly realistic manner, as referring to a transcendent reality.

24. See D.P. Baker, "Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self*: A Transcendental Apologetic?", *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 47 (2000), pp. 155–174. Baker specifically discusses Taylor's highly influential work *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). For an analysis of Taylor as a philosopher engaging in transcendental argumentation, see also Sami Pihlström, "Kant Anthropologized: Charles Taylor on Naturalism and Transcendental Conditions", in Volker Gerhardt, Rolf-Peter Horstmann, and Ralph Schumacher (eds.), *Kant und die Berliner Aufklärung: Akten des IX. Internationalen Kant-Kongresses* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2001), vol. 5, pp. 582–591. Taylor's attitude to religion is also discussed in Michael L. Morgan, "Religion, History and Moral Discourse", in James Tully (ed.), *Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism: The Philosophy of Charles Taylor in Question* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 49–66. It should not be forgotten that while Taylor endorses theism, he believes that secularism is the "only available mode" for a modern democracy: see Charles Taylor, "Modes of Secularism", in Rajeev Bhargava (ed.), *Secularism and Its Critics* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 31–53.
25. See, e.g., Robert Stern (ed.), *Transcendental Arguments: Problems and Prospects* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), and Robert Stern, *Transcendental Arguments and Scepticism: Answering the Question of Justification* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000); for a pragmatic criticism of this approach, cf. Sami Pihlström, "Investigating the Transcendental Tradition", *Philosophy Today* 44 (2000), pp. 426–441.
26. Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (ed. by Raymund Schmidt, Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1990; A = 1781, B = 1787), Bxxx. I have also used the Norman Kemp Smith translation, *Critique of Pure Reason* (London: Macmillan, 1934).
27. Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft* (ed. by Wilhelm Weischedel, in *Immanuel Kant: Werke*, vol. 6, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1983; A = 1788), A223.
28. P.F. Strawson, *Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993; first published 1959).
29. As Paul Franks and Barry Stroud note in their contributions to Stern (ed.), *Transcendental Arguments* (op. cit.), this has been observed by David Bell.
30. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kemp Smith translation (op. cit.), A627/B655. The German original reads as follows: "Wollten wir die Zufälligkeit der Materie selbst beweisen, so müßten wir zu einem transzendentalen Argumente unsere Zuflucht nehmen, welches aber hier eben hat vermieden werden sollen." So this clearly refutes the widespread belief that Kant himself never used the term "transcendental argument", although it must be acknowledged that his usage is somewhat different from the modern one. He thinks that transcendental arguments are *not* a solid part of transcendental philosophy! Perhaps he should have used the term "transcendent", referring to arguments that purport to show something about what falls beyond the reach of human experience and understanding. See, however, also Kant's discussion of the methodological requirements of "transcendental proofs" ("Beweise") at A782/B810 ff.
31. In Stern's terms (see his *Transcendental Arguments and Scepticism*, op. cit., ch. 1), we may say that we are here dealing with a concept- or belief-directed (and thus relatively modest) transcendental argument, instead of a truth-directed (and thus immodest) one. However, Stern's distinction, also employed by several contributors to his edited volume, *Transcendental Arguments* (op. cit.), trivializes the core of Kantian transcendental philosophy, because one of Kant's key points is that the transcendental conditions for the possibility of experience are *ipso facto* conditions for the possibility of the *objects* of experience. It is this "transcendental idealism" that most recent authors pursuing transcen-

- dental arguments, like Stern, find mysterious and unacceptable. From the point of view of pragmatism, Kantian idealism can, however, receive a more naturalized interpretation which nevertheless leaves intact its central idea, the entanglement of our inescapable beliefs and concepts, on the one hand, and the structure of the world for us, on the other. I shall try to employ this strategy below, although no general reinterpretation of transcendental idealism in pragmatic terms is possible here (cf. further Pihlström, “Investigating the Transcendental Tradition”, op. cit.; see also my forthcoming book, *Kant Naturalized, Pragmatism Transcendental*, Amherst, NY: Prometheus/Humanity Books, forthcoming in 2003).
32. Baker, “Charles Taylor’s *Sources of the Self*” (op. cit.), p. 163.
 33. Ibid., p. 162.
 34. Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (op. cit.), p. 27. For Taylor’s account of the nature of transcendental arguments – including the indubitability of their conclusions, given that their premises are correct – see his paper, “The Validity of Transcendental Arguments” (1979), reprinted in Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1995), ch. 2.
 35. Baker, “Charles Taylor’s *Sources of the Self*” (op. cit.), p. 166. I am not trying to determine whether this is correct as an interpretation of Taylor. I am interested in the argument itself.
 36. Ibid., p. 167.
 37. Ibid., pp. 170–171. Thus, Baker assumes – as Taylor himself seems to do, too, in “The Validity of Transcendental Arguments” (op. cit.) – that a valid transcendental argument ought to be truth-directed in Stern’s above-mentioned sense. But perhaps a belief-directed or concept-directed argument is sufficient or at least all we can legitimately hope for in such a problematic case as theism.
 38. Cf. ibid., p. 171, and Pihlström, “Investigating the Transcendental Tradition” (op. cit.).
 39. For such a suggestion in a different context, see Sami Pihlström, “Peircean Scholastic Realism and Transcendental Arguments”, *Transaction of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 34 (1998), pp. 382–413; cf. my *Kant Naturalized* (op. cit.), ch. 4.
 40. This connection between the will to believe doctrine and James’s pragmatist theory of truth is further discussed in Pihlström, *Pragmatism and Philosophical Anthropology* (op. cit.). For James’s famous (or notorious) discussions of truth, see especially his *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (ed. by Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis, Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1975; first published 1907), lecture VI.
 41. Here we should remember that moral realism, the view that there is something like objective rightness or wrongness when it comes to ethical evaluation, and that morality is not just a matter of personal (or cultural) taste, style, or arbitrary preference, is the goal of Taylor’s general transcendental argument, as analyzed by Baker. For a more detailed investigation of the possibility of defending moral realism transcendently, see Sami Pihlström, “Pragmatic Realism and Ethics: A Transcendental Meditation on the Possibility of an Ethical Argument for Moral Realism”, forthcoming in John R. Shook (ed.), *Pragmatic Realism and Naturalism* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books); cf. my *Kant Naturalized* (op. cit.), ch. 8.
 42. Cf., e.g., David Wisdo, *The Life of Irony and the Ethics of Belief* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993).
 43. Cf. the discussion of internal (religious) reasons for religious beliefs in section 2 above. What we have arrived at, I think, is a case study that shows the limitations of the purely epistemological, anti-skeptical treatments of transcendental arguments, to be found, e.g., in the two volumes by Robert Stern cited above. Alternatively, we may say that skepticism

about God's existence is one *prima facie* legitimate area of application for transcendental arguments, if those arguments are taken to be inherently anti-skeptical, but since there will always be room for skepticism here, those arguments, thus construed, can (as we have seen Baker argue) achieve very little in that area. Fortunately, a broader construal is available for pragmatists, as I have tried to propose.

44. See Pihlström, *Pragmatism and Philosophical Anthropology* (op. cit.) pp. 127–128.
45. On the way in which relativism emerges as a problem in a contextualization or “naturalization” of transcendental arguments and principles, see Sami Pihlström, “Naturalism, Transcendental Conditions, and the Self-Discipline of Philosophical Reason”, *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 15 (2001); cf. my *Kant Naturalized* (op. cit.), ch. 2.
46. For critical methodological discussions and comparisons of these and other leading contemporary orientations in the philosophy of religion, see again Koistinen, *Philosophy of Religion or Religious Philosophy?* (op. cit.).
47. For his most recent account, see Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). One of the crucial differences between Wittgensteinians and reformed epistemologists is of course the latter's uncompromisingly realistic conception of religious language (see also note 23 above).
48. See here Marilyn McCord Adams, “Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God”, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, supplementary vol. 63 (1989), pp. 297–310; reprinted in Stump and Murray (eds.), *Philosophy of Religion* (op. cit.), pp. 250–257 (my page references are to the latter). Identifying herself as a Christian philosopher, Adams argues that Christianity does have resources to deal with what she calls “horrendous evils”, evils that may rob one's life of positive meaning, i.e., “evils the participation in (the doing or suffering of) which gives one reason *prima facie* to doubt whether one's life could (given their inclusion in it) be a great good to one on the whole” (p. 251). As Christianity makes sense of the possibility of integrating participation in such evils into one's relation to God (p. 255), and since only a good God can overcome such evils (p. 256), Adams concludes that, “assuming the pragmatic and/or moral (I would prefer to say, broadly speaking, religious) importance of believing that (one's own) human life is worth living, the ability of Christianity to exhibit how this could be so despite human vulnerability to horrendous evil, constitutes a pragmatic/moral/religious consideration in its favour, relative to value schemes that do not” (p. 257). It is hard to see how this argument could be taken seriously by anyone who is not already a “Christian philosopher”.
49. I am indebted to several people for innumerable conversations on the possibility of employing pragmatic and transcendental arguments in (meta)ethical and religious cases, especially to Hanne Ahonen, Heikki Kannisto, Simo Knuuttila, Timo Koistinen, Irma Levomäki, Thomas Wallgren, and Kenneth R. Westphal, as well as to the students who have participated in my philosophy of religion courses at the University of Helsinki in 2001. I also wish to thank an anonymous referee of this *Journal* for helpful suggestions.

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