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A PHILOSOPHICAL GUIDE

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5. Self-Management

Sour Grapes

The Fox in Aesop's fable stumbles on some grapes in the woods that look appetizing to him. He jumps for the vine but can't reach the grapes. He walks off and says something unappreciative about the grapes to cope with his frustration. Precisely what he says differs from one version of the fable to the next in subtle ways. Sometimes he changes tastes, sometimes he changes beliefs, and sometimes he changes frames. These are all different strategies for adapting to failure and hardship. Each of these strategies, as we will see, yields interesting conundrums.

There is no genuine original version of the fable—Aesop is thought to have lived in the seventh and sixth century BCE, but no actual writings by his hand survive. There is a Latin version by Phaedrus (p. 114–15) dating back to the first century CE. There is a seventeenth-century French version by de La Fontaine (p. 92). There is also an eighteenth-century English version by Samuel Croxall (p. 41) and there are nineteenth-century English versions by Joseph Benjamin Rundell (p. 100) and by Walter Crane and W.J. Lipton. These versions make for interesting comparisons.

In Crane and Lipton's version, the Fox 'to this hour,/ Declares that he has no taste for grapes.' Granted, the Fox may be kidding himself—he still likes grapes but just says that he doesn't. That is possible, but let's take the Fox's word for it—he no longer likes grapes. This is not an implausible reading: The Fox represents humankind, and it is a common human strategy to cope with frustration by tuning down or extinguishing one's desires.

Phaedrus has the Fox talking to the grapes: 'You are not ripe yet—I don't want to eat you while you are (still) sour.' Similarly, Croxall's Fox

proclaims: 'Let who will take them! They are but green and sour; so I'll even let them alone.' This is a different coping strategy. The Fox doesn't change his tastes. He still likes grapes—nice, sweet, and juicy grapes—as much as he did before. But the grapes on the vine in the woods—no, they are green, unripe, and hence nasty and sour, he says. This is a case of shifting beliefs. Before the Fox found out that he couldn't reach them, he had no doubt that these grapes were ripe and ready for eating. It's only after he finds out that he can't reach them that he comes to believe that the grapes are not ripe yet. The Fox is kidding himself about these grapes—he is a self-deceiving fox.

Then there are foxes for whom eating grapes suddenly becomes too vulgar. De La Fontaine's Fox says that these grapes are 'good for low-lives,' and Rundell's Fox declares that grapes are 'not at all fit for a gentleman's eating.' This is yet another way to cope. The Fox places eating grapes in a different frame. Grapes are grub for the plebs of the woods. A fox shouldn't be caught scarfing down grapes. He should dine like the nobler animals do—on field mice or what have you.

Compare this to finding the local convenience store closed when you have a sudden urge for a cigarette. You turn around and say: 'Oh well, smoking is bad for my health anyway.' This is not self-deception. What you say is true enough, and you knew it all along. It's just that the urge for that cigarette was so strong. There are some nice things about cigarettes and some not so nice things. Now that you can't have your smoke, you might as well focus on the not so nice things. You switch frames so that you can cope.

There are pure cases of taste, belief, and frame shifts, but often, they occur in combination. I run into a friend who regularly travels from New York to Boston for work. She says that she takes the plane—it's fast and typically takes about four hours door-to-door. When I tell her that I tend to take the train for that stretch, she makes a wry face and says that she is sure glad her company does not make her do that. A year later, we run into each other on the train from New York to Boston. She tells me that her company changed policies, and she now has to take the train. I ask how she likes it. She says that she finds it quite nice. Why might that be?

She may have changed beliefs: She may tell me that the plane typically takes a good *six* hours door-to-door and that it's actually faster by train. Or she may have changed tastes: She may tell me that she had no choice

but took to it easily and grew to like it fast enough—'Frankly, now that I am used to it,' she might say, 'I don't understand how I ever put up with air travel.' Or she may have changed frames: She may tell me about the carbon footprints of air travel versus train travel and that she is glad that she is not traveling by air anymore, considering climate change. Or, as is typically the case, she may have done a bit of each.

And there is often ambiguity—not all responses fit neatly in the boxes of taste, belief, and frame shifts. If my friend comes to believe that the *average* travel time by air is longer, that would be a belief shift. But it is more likely that previously she focused on trips when the travel times by air were markedly faster, but now focuses on trips when the travel times by train are markedly faster. This would be more of a frame shift. Maybe she was a skeptic about climate change before. In that case her frame shift comparing carbon footprints also involves a belief shift. Or perhaps her taste shift from plane to train travel involves a frame shift— she genuinely came to enjoy train travel by focusing on the fact that one can get work done on the train.

Mind Control

An appeal to sour grapes deals with the frustration that comes with not being able to get what we want. That is one reason to self-manage by shifting beliefs, tastes, and frames. But it is not the only reason. We make *willful belief shifts, taste shifts,* and *frame shifts* not just to deal with frustration but to make our lives less painful, more bearable, or more pleasurable overall.

Such acts of self-management may not happen consciously. It may require a third party to see what we are up to. The will controls a good many things in life without our being conscious of it doing so. And even if a third party tells us that some sudden shift in beliefs, tastes, or frames looks like sour grapes, we may vehemently deny it.

Let's start with *willful belief shifts*. In Arthur Miller's play *All My Sons*, Joe and Kate Keller's son is a fighter pilot reported as missing in action. Joe Keller is running a company that knowingly sells defective airplane parts to the military, causing many pilots' deaths. All the evidence points to the fact that their son is dead, but Kate refuses to believe

it—she continues polishing his shoes for the day of his return. This is a case of *wishful thinking*.

People try to forget painful episodes in their past. War traumas, unhappy childhoods, abandonment, or sexual abuse are erased from memory, are selectively remembered, or are substituted by more palatable but inaccurate accounts. These are cases of *willful forgetting* and *willful misremembering*.

Wishful thinking, willful forgetting, and willful misremembering are all cases of willful belief shifts. Some of the things we believe don't make us very happy. We try to cope with these beliefs by either deleting them, editing them, or overwriting them with more palatable versions.

As to *willful taste shifts*, the Fox could work up his tastes for other culinary delights that the woods have to offer. If the field mice are abundant and the blackberries are in season, he can try to appreciate this new menu. If he finds better food than grapes, then it's easy enough to extinguish his desire for the grapes on the vines that he can't reach.

Think of adapting to changing circumstances. You move to the city— you try to work up an appreciation for theater and live music. You move to the country—you do the same for hiking and the great outdoors. With the right social context to prod, you can make art critics out of philistines and nature lovers out of city slickers.

Young love tends to work very much like this. Your new soulmate may like all kinds of things—dog shows, country music, paragliding, or what have you—that were not high up on your list before they showed up. But you are having the time of your life, and you are willing to give anything a shot. As you are accompanying them on these new adventures, you come to enjoy all kinds of things. Young love could even make curling look a blast.

In *willful frame shifts,* we place what we can't have in a negative frame and what we do have in a positive frame. Or we contrast the present situation—dismal as it may be—with an even worse situation as in the proverbial, 'It could have been worse!'

The pre-Raphaelite painter Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema numbered all his paintings in the order that he painted them to fend off forgeries. When he died, there was one painting missing—painting 338. An

unknown forger, probably a London art dealer, took advantage of this by forging Alma-Tadema's name on unknown paintings and adding the number 338. Claiming to have uncovered the elusive painting, he sold the forgeries for high prices—mostly to art collectors from continental Europe who would be less likely to come back and challenge him. Many of these forgeries are still around. (The real 338 recently resurfaced at an antique roadshow in England.)

Now suppose that you have unwittingly paid decent money for one of these forgeries. You certainly wouldn't do it again, but you might come to reconcile yourself with the fact that you own one of the most famous forgeries of the Victorian age. You own a painting sold by 'The Master of 338' as he has come to be known. It is a good story. You creatively reframe your misfortune and make lemonade out of lemons.

As in the case of sour grapes, there are many hybrid cases. I restricted taste shifts to instances where the shift is purely in taste—as in, losing one's taste for coffee for no discernible reason. In my examples of taste change following a move or new love, such a pure taste change may be at work. But I may also come to see the activity in a different frame. Whereas I thought that curling was plain boring before, I now come to appreciate, say, the cooperative aspect of it.

There is a danger of compliance that comes with such coping mechanisms. One can be overly skillful in coping with one's present situation and this can take away the courage to fight for much-needed change. For example, you may adapt to being grossly underpaid by developing simple tastes, but maybe what you should do is gather the courage to knock on your boss's door and demand a raise. Or you may adapt to living with an abusive spouse by telling yourself that things will get better, whereas what you really should do is call a lawyer and file for divorce.

The situation may be genuinely unalterable, though. It may be such that no amount of courage can bring about change. In cases like this, tinkering with beliefs, tastes, and frames seems like the best way to cope with adversity and adapt to an irrevocable situation. We willfully steer our mental states to shore up strength, to safeguard our happiness, or at least to protect ourselves against a downward spiral of depression. There is a motivational quote that pops up on

many websites and is attributed to Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*: 'You have power over your mind, not over outside events. Realize this, and you will find strength.' The quote is fitting and in the spirit of Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*, but the connection to any passage in the *Meditations* is tenuous at best.

Do we have power over our minds? Some people hold beliefs strictly informed by the evidence, stick to what they want, and don't fall for reframing. Others willfully manage their beliefs, tastes, or frames without flinching. They make up stories to make themselves feel better, have maximally elastic tastes, or always come up with an optimistic take on the situation. They have internal control over what they believe, what they want, and how they frame matters. And they are masters at working these controls to keep life maximally sweet.

There are fanciful techniques for self-management. Hypnotherapists claim to erase memories and extinguish the urge to smoke. Drugs can reduce or increase sexual desire, control addictions, or make you see things in a rosier way. Amnesiac drugs make you forget about your colonoscopy. Beer lowers inhibitions. And philosophers like to imagine a pill that will make you believe that two plus two is five.

A particular mode of self-management that is less fanciful but both common and curious is pretense—acting as if one already has brought about the projected mental shift with the aim of bringing it about. It's the old saying: Fake it till you make it. This is what we will turn to next.

Pretense

Here is a classic case of a willful belief shift through pretense. Blaise Pascal gives us a recipe for acquiring religious belief in his *Pensées* (§233) where he first lays out his wager: Either God exists, or he doesn't. If he does, then you gain much by believing. If he does not, you don't have anything to lose by believing. So, you should believe.

The logic that governs this choice is the same as a mundane choice like this one: Should I throw an umbrella in the car? Why not? If it rains, you will be happy you have it along—and if not, then nothing is lost. So, take an umbrella.

Pascal then envisions someone who says that they just can't make themselves believe—they are just not the type to hold religious beliefs.

Pascal's advice: Just act as if you already believe. Bless yourself with holy water and attend Mass. Start with a bit of pretense, and your beliefs will follow suit soon enough.

The same strategy works for willfully shifting tastes. Your friends decide to have wine-tasting parties with dry white wines. You would like to join in, but you don't like dry white wines. But you just decide to sign up. You also decide not to be a killjoy—you won't be making wry faces and negative remarks. You will act as if you like them. In the right environment and with the right attitude, you figure, you will probably come to appreciate dry white wines.

It also helps when it comes to willfully shifting frames. As you agree to join your new love in their favorite pastime, you will come to discover frames in which activities that were in the same category as a visit to the dentist suddenly become exciting and rewarding. You wouldn't have been caught dead at a dog show, but things have changed since your dog-loving darling came on stage. So, you figure that something about it will strike your fancy—there will be some frame that will break the tedium of dog shows. Maybe you always liked biology, and you see the potential to strike up a conversation about canine genetics with the breeders.

In Kurt Vonnegut's novel *Mother Night*, he writes: 'We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be.' This isn't entirely true—there is some distance between pretense and reality: A conman is not a neurosurgeon. But what is true is that we tend to *become* what we pretend to be. By pretending to have a particular outlook, appreciation, and belief, we become a person with such an outlook, appreciation, and belief. So indeed, we need to be very careful about what we pretend to be.

Why does pretending set us on the path toward the real thing? What is the magic of these charades? There is no straight answer to this. The fact of the matter is that there are multiple paths and paths crisscross one another.

Frame switches happen on the most innocuous routes. Through pretending, you have a chance to discover and try out frames that permit you to appreciate what you loathed before. Pretense offers learning opportunities. It's not as simple as 'try it, you'll like it,' but rather 'try it, you'll find ways to come to like it.'

Taste switches can also be quite simple and innocent, as our tastes tend to shift with increased exposure. For instance, you figure that your tastes will just shift as you drink dry wines in pleasant surroundings. Perhaps you will even grow to like them. After all, familiarity breeds fondness. But it's not that you find reasons for liking them—rather, you will just come to appreciate the taste. It doesn't always work, but it's a strategy that is worth trying.

Belief switches are trickier. We like to think of ourselves as acting in line with what we believe. Suppose one acts as if one believes something that one does not actually believe. Then it's easy enough just to shift beliefs so that actions and beliefs are properly aligned again.

The psychologist Leon Festinger calls this *cognitive dissonance*. In the late 1950s, he and his colleague James Merrill Carlsmith conducted an experiment in which subjects were instructed to do a thoroughly boring task. They were then asked to brief a person who was a stooge but was introduced to them as the next subject who was about to start the task. They were instructed to tell this person that the task was enjoyable. Many of them complied. Some were paid little, while others were paid well for the briefing. Subsequently, the subjects were asked whether they thought that the task really was enjoyable. The curious thing is that those who were paid less were more likely to say that it was, more so than those who were paid well.

Why did they do so? The subjects asked themselves: Why did I brief the next subject in the way I did? Those who were paid well had an easy answer: The money made it worth it. But those who were paid poorly did not, and they had some explaining to do. So, they resorted to telling themselves: Well, I guess I must believe what I told them.

There is one difference between Pascal's advice and the cognitive dissonance experiments. Following Pascal, we ourselves decide to act as if we believe something to bring about changes in our beliefs. In the cognitive dissonance experiments, we are manipulated into acting as if we believe something within the context of the experiment. But from here on, the mechanism is the same. We witness ourselves acting counter to our beliefs, need to explain why we are doing this, and the strategy we come up with is to shift our beliefs.

The same strategy is present in wishful thinking. A person diagnosed with terminal cancer tells me that they are making grand plans to build

a new house, go on long trips, etc. Why are they doing this? They very much want to beat the cancer, so they start to act as if they can do so and have many more years to live and carry out their plans. They then ask: 'It wouldn't be reasonable for a person with terminal cancer to act like that, would it?' In a similar vein, Nina Riggs writes that buying an expensive couch while facing a terminal diagnosis is 'a lovely expression of hopefulness.' ('When a Couch is More than a Couch.' The *New York Times*, 23 Sep. 2016)

Willful frame and taste shifts seem much more innocent than willful belief shifts. In willful frame shifts, we are just creatively exploring how we might cast a positive light on something that didn't seem too appealing to begin with. In willful taste shifts, we rely on the psychological mechanism of prolonged exposure breeding fondness and bank on that doing the work for us. But in willful belief shifts, we seem to be kidding ourselves. It doesn't make much sense to infer from one's long-term planning that one can't possibly be dying if the only reason one engaged in this long-term planning is to convince oneself that one's prognosis is rosier than it really is. Similarly, it doesn't make much sense for Pascal to infer from his religious practices that there must be a God if the only reason he engaged in these practices is to convince himself that there is a God. It seems like an elaborate act of self-deception.

So, is it simply thumbs up for willful frame and taste shifts and thumbs down for willful belief shifts? So far, it certainly seems like that. But my goal in the remainder of this chapter is to be a bit subversive and turn things upside down. Some willful taste and frame shifts are problematic because they are *self-defeating*: They do not get off the ground because the projected taste or frame resists manipulation. And some willful belief shifts are quite innocent and may even be imperative because they are *self-verifying*. If you face a challenge, you should believe that you can do it, rather than setting yourself up for failure.

Self-Defeat

Aristotle lays out the path to becoming a courageous person in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (Book 2, Ch. 1). Say that I find much cowardice within me—in my actions, choices, fears, and aspirations. But I set out to become more courageous by acting as if I am already courageous. I force

myself to go for walks in the woods at night, join a survival camp, or, in a different sphere of life, shift some of my assets to high-risk stocks. And it may work—I may learn to give up my fears and to face danger and uncertainty with a smile. I may learn to enjoy doing the courageous thing.

It may work nicely for courage, but there are obstacles for other types of values. In the wake of Peter Singer's work, the Effective Altruism movement has gained much momentum recently. The website, *Giving What We Can*, invites you to make a pledge to donate at least ten percent of your income and helps you pick the most effective charities. Effective charities are such that the next donation you make to them has the potential to save the most lives from premature death and reduce the most suffering.

I know that there is much suffering in the world and that there are various charitable organizations that provide effective relief. But suppose that I find myself completely unmotivated to donate to charity. Frankly, I'd rather spend the money on a night on the town. Writing that check to the Against Malaria Foundation simply hurts.

In *The Doctrine of Virtue* (p. 575–6), Kant tells us that if we find ourselves lacking in compassion and find it hard to be charitable, we should seek out 'sickrooms and debtors' prisons' and expose ourselves to the world's sufferings. If I am trying to become the kind of person who wants to give a bit more and wine-and-dine a bit less, I could try Kant's advice. Maybe giving will come a bit easier next time around.

Charity is driven by compassion, and a compassionate person is a person who is self-forgetful and other-directed. But there is something troubling about trying to become more compassionate by performing more self-forgetful and other-directed actions. Why are we setting out on this path? Well, we would like to become better people. But why do we want to become better people?

We may want to become better people because it will make it easier to do the right thing, and then it is reasonable to expect that we will come to do more of it. This is Kant's motivation, and there is nothing problematic about this. However, we may also want to become better people because of the sheer beauty of having a self-forgetful and other-directed character. But this is a terribly self-focused way to live: It is navel-gazing to build a less navel-gazing character. Good luck with that!

One may end up even more self-absorbed than when one started. On this path, you will create a Narcissus, not a Gandhi.

This is how the economist Paul Seabright (*Ethics*, 98(2), 1988) reads Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady*. The self-defeating project of trying to be other-oriented and self-forgetful is played out in Isabel Archer, the protagonist of the novel. Isabel is obsessed with the state of her character. Lord Warburton, who admires Isabel, warns her that this is no way to live: 'Don't try so much to form your character—it's like trying to pull open a tight, tender young rose. Live as you like best, and your character will form itself.' (Ch. XXI) One should not try to make a work of art of oneself. One should aim to do noble things, but not aim to become a person with a noble character—the latter is just a recipe for self-centeredness and unhappiness.

The problem of self-defeat is not restricted to trying to attain a more self-forgetful and other-directed character. Self-defeat is also an issue in other projects of sculpting the self.

Think of *hipster* apathy—a resistance to take anything seriously, to embrace any conception of a good life. This commitment to apathy is even self-reflective: Hipsters fiercely deny the label of being a hipster. To do otherwise is to admit that they are serious about their hipster lifestyle with all the trappings of hipsterdom: the ukulele and the five-string banjo, piercings and pacers, vintage clothing, Pabst beer, fixie bikes, knitting circles, pickle bars, Indie Rock, and handlebar mustaches.

This attitude of apathy suffers the same fate as self-forgetfulness: Its pursuit is self-defeating. The more you *want* to cultivate an attitude of apathy, the more you believe that there is something worth striving for in this world. And the more you believe that there is something worth striving for, the less you are flirting with apathy. To stand for standing-for-nothing is like a Liar Paradox. If you truly stand for nothing, then you can't stand for standing-for-nothing. If you truly are a liar, then you can't truthfully say that you are a liar. Hipsters wear T-shirts, saying 'I am not a hipster,' just as paradox aficionados like to write 'This statement is false' on the blackboard.

Another feature in the cultural landscape is the New Sincerity vogue with iconic figures such as the author David Foster Wallace, the filmmaker Wes Anderson, or the musician Joanna Newsom. What is cherished is naiveté, directness, spontaneity—a beeline from feeling to

expression. But there is a tension between planning and spontaneity: You cannot carefully lay out the tracks for a beeline.

So, are we doomed? Is it hopeless? Is the self-forgetfulness of Isabel Archer, the apathy of the hipsters, and the naiveté of New Sincerity forever out of reach of wannabes? There is a special hurdle here that was absent in Aristotle's project of acquiring courage. Wanting to become self-forgetful as a motivation for doing self-forgetful actions is problematic in a way that wanting to become courageous as a motivation for doing courageous actions is not. But not all is lost. There is a way forward that takes its inspiration from Homer's Ulysses.

When Ulysses set out to sail past the Sirens, who lured sailors to shipwreck with their enchanting singing, he ordered his men to stuff their ears with wax so they would not hear them. He himself was eager to hear their song but understood that, like so many before him, he would not be able to resist. So, he had himself bound to the mast and gave orders to his crew that he was not to be unbound, however much he might implore them.

Similarly, we can bind ourselves to a routine with the motivation to become more caring, apathetic, or sincere. Once the routine is established, we don't need to motivate every single act anymore—we just do what needs doing within the constraints of the routine. Without the self-defeating motivations, our routine actions will mold our attitudes, and our characters will shift toward charity, spontaneity, and apathy.

What should we do to bind ourselves? We can join Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity. If we decide today to do just that, then we will be called upon daily to do self-forgetful and other-directed actions without having to think all the time that what we are aiming for is to improve our precious selves. We can join social groups who live the hipster lifestyle or breathe New Sincerity. We can immerse ourselves in a wide range of cultural expressions that define a cultural movement—be it literature, film, or music—and just let it all happen. We absorb what is on offer while forgetting that we had a plan.

Does it work for some people? No doubt. But strategies of self-sculpting are fragile. One needs a divided mind with one part doing the planning and the other part doing the forgetting of why precisely we set out on this route. And failures abound. Think of the smug bankers

working in soup kitchens, even more full of self-importance than on Wall Street. New Sincerity art can become so contrived that it becomes unbearable—a sad product spawned by willful spontaneity. And the don't-give-a-damn hipsters who do care a great deal about exhibiting the right hipster paraphernalia have long become a household joke.

Self-Verification

The American philosopher William James collected essays which he had delivered as public talks to student societies, and published them in 1897 under the title *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*. Four of the essays aim to defend the legitimacy of religious belief against skeptical voices from the scientific community at the time. There are some interesting insights to be gleaned about the circumstances under which it is permissible to adopt beliefs, not on grounds of the evidence, but simply because there is something to be gained from believing.

James writes that we can't just believe that the existence of Abraham Lincoln is a myth and that his portraits are all of someone else. We can't believe ourselves to be well when we are 'roaring with rheumatism in bed' or that the 2 one-dollar bills in our pocket add up to one hundred dollars, however much we may wish for this to be true or however strong our will is. There is no blanket endorsement for believing what we would like to believe, but James considers two special cases.

The first special case is, in James's words, when 'faith in a fact can help create the fact' or 'faith [...] creates its own verification.' James finds this logic at work in 'promotions, boons, appointments'—they go to the people who believe that these gains are somehow in the cards for them. There are limits to self-verifying beliefs, though. James is no Rhonda Byrne in her 2006 bestseller *The Secret* proclaiming that we can get anything we want so long as we wish hard enough for it and pretend that we already have it. This would lead to complacency: Sometimes, actions and not positive thinking are needed to realize our goals.

Nonetheless, there is a proper place for a can-do mentality. If you believe that you will make a good impression, can jump the creek, can pass the exam, then you are so much more likely to succeed. The opposite is to set yourself up for failure. Once you lose confidence that you can pull off the task ahead, then your determination falters, and you

are indeed likely to fail. That's why it's essential to keep up the morale on the battle-field—if the morale falters, the war is as good as lost.

There is nothing untoward if we make ourselves believe that we will pull off the task at hand. If believing indeed warrants that we will pull it off, then why shouldn't we be able to believe this? Part of the evidence is that I am setting myself up for success. The belief is self-verifying, but it does not go beyond the evidence.

But it is a different story when people overshoot. I am always struck by how confident people in an election campaign feel about victory. They seem to think that the world will somehow unfold in mysterious ways, and their candidate who is way behind in the polls will move forward with leaps and bounds. Part of it is just pretense to pull in the vote. But they often seem to believe it. Now, this confidence may raise the chance of their candidate winning from, say, a very small chance to a slightly greater but still small chance. And without the confidence that victory was at the doorstep, this slight raise might not have happened.

Similarly, it may well be the case that I need to banish from my mind any doubt that I may not make a good impression, won't be able to jump the creek, or won't pass the exam to have any chance to pull off these feats. But if I take a step away from the action and ask myself honestly what my chances are, I need to admit that I barely have a fighting chance.

Is there something untoward about banishing such doubts? Now we are believing against the evidence. It seems to me that nothing is lost, so long as we don't stake the farm on making a good impression, jumping the creek, or passing the exam. Part of us believes that we can pull it off, and that's the part that gives us confidence, keeps anxieties in check, and motivates us to be prepared. But another part of us keeps an eye on the evidence, refrains from staking too much on our success, and refrains from making rash decisions. This requires a bit of a divided mind. But what's so bad about a divided mind, a mind that is playing a bit of hide-and-seek with itself?

There is career advice in this. Suppose you are working a less than fully desirable job and you have a job interview for a highly desirable job lined up. It is good to harbor contradictory beliefs. One part of you should be confident that you will shine. That is the part that walks into the interview with a smile and a confident stride. The other part should heed the evidence and be much more cautious. That is the part that

does not burn bridges and stops you from handing in your resignation prematurely. Some people can't do it—their minds are single-track, leave no room for hide-and-seek. That's alright. But why be down on those who can? When managed carefully, a divided mind is a fine thing to cherish. Walt Whitman's line from the poem 'Song of Myself' (§51) comes to mind: 'Do I contradict myself?/ Very well then I contradict myself,/ (I am large, I contain multitudes.)'

James concludes his essay 'Is Life Worth Living?' with a piece of advice: 'Be not afraid of life. Believe that life *is* worth living, and your belief will help create the fact.' The advice requires willful belief change. One may find one's life marred by existential worries. We follow James's advice hoping that the worries will dissipate. And if they do, then life will indeed be worth living. James does not seem fully confident that it will work: The phrase 'your belief will help create the fact' displays less confidence than if he had written, 'your belief creates the fact.' But no matter. Even if adopting the full-blooded belief that life is worth living raises the *chance* of shedding existential worries or just *softens* them to some extent, it is good advice, nonetheless.

The second special case is designed to legitimate religious belief based on limited evidence. James's conditions are perfectly general and not restricted to religious belief. You may adopt a belief at will if doing so is a '*live*' option, and the choice is '*forced*' and '*momentous.*' What does James mean by that?

In Cambridge, Massachusetts of James's time, it was not a *live* option to become a 'Theosophist' or a 'Mohammedan,' but being an atheist, an agnostic, subscribing to various Christian faiths were live options for him and many of his contemporaries. James uses the metaphor of live electrical wires. Live options are options that are offered by one's life world and are not closed off by overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

The choice is *forced* in that James thinks we can't proclaim indifference to the matter, as one could concerning whether it will rain on Sunday, whether Arsenal will win the next game, or whether string theory is true.

And the choice is *momentous* in that we only have this life to make the decision, and it radically affects how we live our lives.

James gives us a perfectly general scheme to determine whether one may reasonably embrace religious beliefs. But do these conditions

transfer to secular beliefs? I think so. Suppose that your child is accused of a crime. The evidence is far from conclusive. It is a live option for you to believe that they are innocent; it is a forced choice because you are called upon to take a stand; and it is a momentous choice because it makes a difference to one of the most valued relationship in your life. So, following James's advice, we can just embrace the belief that they are innocent. We may be in error, but fear of error should not hold us back in this case. We don't have to sit back and say, 'Well, I don't know what to believe.' Rather, we may stand by a belief in their innocence in the same way that we may stand by a religious belief.

There is something curious about the connection between James's discussion of self-verifying beliefs and religious belief. In 'The Will to Believe,' the argument seems to be an argument from analogy. Just as it is permissible to will to believe self-verifying beliefs, it is permissible to will to believe when it concerns a forced and momentous choice of a live option. But in 'Is Life Worth Living?' he draws a much tighter connection:

> [W]ill our faith in the unseen world similarly verify itself? [...] I confess that I do not see why the very existence of an invisible world may not in part depend on the personal response which any one of us may make to the religious appeal. God himself, in short, may draw vital strength and increase of very being from our fidelity.

For James, the belief in the supernatural is a belief that contributes its own truth. Just like believing that we can jump the creek makes it happen, believing in the supernatural brings it into existence. This position is not in line with the independence or self-existence of God in the Abrahamic faiths. In the Abrahamic faiths, God would continue to exist, even if the last person on earth embraced atheism. But enough said—the waters of theology have become too deep for us to wade into any further.