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Blessed are Those Who Have Not Seen and Yet Believe

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Truth is not that which is demonstrable, but that which is ineluctable.[1]

Antoine de Saint Exupéry

Proofs for the existence of God have always generated debate. St. Paul, warning us of the "empty lure of a 'philosophy' of the kind human beings hand on, based on the principles of this world and not on Christ" (Colossians 2:8), juxtaposes the "folly" of the cross to the "wisdom" of the world (1 Corinthians 1:18), and reminds us that we see things, at best, "through a glass darkly" (1 Corinthians 13:12). Kierkegaard imagines the desire for proof met with anger by the "god-man:" "If I pleaded with [God] to manifest himself in some other way, to spare himself, then he would look at me and say: Man, what have you to do with me; go away, for you are of Satan, even if you yourself do not understand it!"[2] More recently, John D. Caputo has argued that all of our decisions, including those about God, are haunted by a structural undecidability, "an endless, open-ended, indeterminable, undecidable *translatability*, or *substitutability*, or *exemplarity*, where we are at a loss to say what is an example of what, what is a translation of what."[3] Clearly, suspicion surrounding the idea that rational arguments can overcome the essential mystery of faith is long standing and well established.

On one extreme we find thinkers who assert that God's existence can be demonstrated and known with absolute certainty. Take, for example, Descartes's bold assertion regarding the efficacy of his ontological proof in the Fifth Meditation:

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[1] Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *Wind, Sand and Stars*, trans. Lewis Galantière (New York: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1992), 218.

[2] Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 33.

[3] John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion Without Religion* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1997), 25. See also idem, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2006), which is a more recent expression of Caputo's position, and one more specific to his own thinking (*The Prayers and Tears* being Caputo's work on Derrida).

> And it belongs to God's nature that he always exists is something I understand no less clearly and distinctly than is the case when I demonstrate in regard to some figure or number that something also belongs to the nature of that figure or number. Thus, even if not everything that I have meditated upon during these last few days were true, still the existence of God ought to have for me at least the same degree of certainty that truths of mathematics had until now.[4]

However, others feel the desire for certainty—via proof, demonstration, or miracle—is ultimately rooted in a misunderstanding of our place in the world and our relationship to God. Requiring proof amounts to something like an aspiration to transgress the natural limits of human knowledge or an arrogant attempt to demand assurances from God. St. Augustine points out that "God is tempted in religion itself, when signs and wonders are demanded of him" and confesses, "O Lord my God, to whom I owe humble and single-minded service, by how many tricks and suggestions does the enemy work upon me, so that I might seek some sign from you!"[5] Christ himself was challenged to prove his kinship with God, but responded that God is not to be "tested" (Luke 4:12) and, perhaps most tellingly, later admonished Thomas, "Have you come to believe because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed" (John 20:29).[6]

Traditionally, many of those who question or deny the efficacy of proofs of the existence of God have been lumped together as "fideists." However, there are various ways to emphasize faith, and we should not be too quick to conflate them. Michael Vertin's "Properly Situating Philosophical Arguments for God" (in this volume) does a remarkable job of articulating the diversity of positions that assert a disjunction between the realm of faith and that of reason. Of special importance are the positions labeled "e" to "m" in Vertin's typology, which assert in various ways that philosophical arguments for the existence of God are religiously irrelevant. Given this diversity, an incontestable definition of fideism would be complicated and difficult. However, Alvin Plantinga offers a useful working definition for our purposes: a fideist "urges reliance on faith rather than reason," and further "*may* go on to disparage and denigrate reason."[7] Note that on

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[4] Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993), 89-90.

[5] Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. John K. Ryan (New York: Image Books, 1960), 265. Ryan's footnote to the latter sentence hazards, "Augustine was apparently subjected to severe temptations to seek some visible sign from God that he was assured of salvation." Ibid., 406.

[6] This exchange between Jesus and Thomas is even more interesting in light of postmodern analyses of the longstanding analogizing of knowledge and sight. Thus, a postmodern twist might read this exchange as follows: "Do you believe because you know me? Blessed are those who do not know and yet believe."

[7] Alvin Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," in Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, ed., *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press), 87. My emphasis.

this definition not all fideism disparages reason. Rather, the essential characteristic of fideism is reliance on faith. Nevertheless, at times the tension between faith and reason has been articulated as a problem in which these two sources of authority are fundamentally antagonistic and incompatible: fideists emphasize the limits of reason, while rationalists assert that faith is unfounded.

Given this commonplace polarization, it is curious that secular postmodernity *both* disparages faith *and* undermines reason. Modernity, in the form of the Enlightenment and the scientific revolution, slew faith along with God. However, when postmodernity began to question the modern trust in and use of reason, it did not think to question whether or not the news of the death of God at the hands of reason had been, as the saying goes, greatly exaggerated. Early on, postmodern critiques were largely separate from discussions of the relationship between faith and reason. Thus, postmodernity undermined reason, but without rehabilitating faith. However, decades into the postmodern era, this lacuna is being addressed by a variety of thinkers.

The postmodern project, broadly construed and for a variety of reasons, attempts to undermine Enlightenment faith in reason. Insofar as the Enlightenment represented a secular turn to reason--epitomized in Immanuel Kant's rallying call: *Sapere Aude*!—postmodernity can reasonably be characterized as a post-secular turn away from hubristic confidence in the power of reason. Ironically, it was Kant himself who "found it necessary to deny *knowledge*, in order to make room for *faith*."[8] While the post-secular turn of contemporary continental philosophy is evident in the work of many thinkers, nowhere is the re-sacralization of postmodernity more evident than in the so-called "religious reading" of deconstruction, exemplified by John D. Caputo's brilliant, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*.[9] On Caputo's reading, the indeterminate but passionate hope of deconstruction has much in common with religiosity, if less with particular religions. Deconstruction, we noted above, alerts us to the undecidability of otherness, which leaves us unable to say what is an example of what, what is a translation of what, etc. Contrary to appearances, however, undecidability is not "the apathy of indecision but the passion of

[8] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965), 29.

[9] Of course, theological questions have never been entirely absent from the continental dialogue. Levinas, Marcel and Ricoeur all wrote on religious issues. However, the influence of thinkers interested in theological questions has grown dramatically in recent years. This post-secular turn has not been uncontroversial. Dominique Janicaud's *Phenomenology and the "Theological Turn": The French Debate*, trans. Bernard G. Prusak (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000) documents the theological orientation of thinkers such as Ricoeur, Henry, and Marion, and questions the appropriateness of a philosophical approach to theological questions. Contemporary work of particular importance to the matter at issue in this paper can be found in Jacques Derrida's *Circumfession* and Caputo's *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida* (cited above, note 3), as well as the volumes collected from Caputo's conferences on "Religion and Postmodernism" at Villanova University: John D. Caputo et al, eds, *Questioning God* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2001) and idem, *God, the Gift and Postmodernism* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press 1999). Also see Janicaud's *Phenomenology Wide Open: After the French Debate*, trans. Charles N. Cabral (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005).

faith."[10] *Faith* is required when we do not *know* and, nevertheless, must make a decision. For deconstruction, "*everything* begins and ends in faith."[11] If modernity slew God and turned to reason, postmodernity has returned the favor by radically undermining reason to make expansive room for faith. Whether this faith is faith in God is a matter for another time; nevertheless, postmodernity, at least in the guise of deconstruction, has returned us to a robust type of fideism.[12] In such an environment, is there any room for the traditional proofs of God's existence? What role, if any, can they still play?

The religious reading of deconstruction exhibits similarities with several other philosophies including those of Søren Kierkegaard and William James. However, in what follows, I am interested in a particular distinction highlighted in both pragmatic and postmodern accounts of religious belief: the difference between knowledge and faith.[13] Once we have differentiated knowledge and faith, I will introduce a second distinction between faith and belief, suggesting that while both the pragmatic tradition and the continental/postmodern tradition have the resources to make this second, more subtle distinction, deconstruction tends to neglect these resources and to conflate belief with faith.[14] This second distinction will, among other things, help us to differentiate between two sorts of fideism. Finally, returning to the traditional proofs for the existence of God, I will suggest that "proofs" of the existence of God may play a legitimate role in bracing or steeling us for the leap of faith, and in helping us to make the leap again and again. Proofs for the existence of God can help develop the conviction necessary to leap unconditionally.

Faith is not Knowledge

Faith is not knowledge; both pragmatic and postmodern accounts take this as a given. Knowledge implies certainty and depends on verification of some nature. The absence of demonstrable proof—that is, the absence of "verification" in pragmatic terminology—is the circumstance that calls for faith. Or, in deconstructive language, "undecidability is the condition for the possibility of faith."[15] However, while most people recognize on some level that they cannot

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[10] Ibid., 338.

[11] Emphasis mine. John D. Caputo, "What Do I Love When I Love My God? Deconstruction and Radical Orthodoxy," in Caputo, *Questioning God*, 296.

[12] Regarding the religiosity of deconstruction, see my "The God Who May Be: *Quis ergo amo cum Deum meum amo*?" *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia*, vol. 60, 2004. Reprinted in John Manoussakis, ed., *After God* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 139-154.

[13] The similarities between pragmatism and postmodernism have not gone unnoticed. See, for example, Chantal Mouffe, ed., *Deconstruction and Pragmatism* (London: Routeledge, 1996).

[14] I would agree that deconstruction is not necessarily committed to this error. That is, while deconstruction "tends" to conflate belief and faith, it is not necessary that it does so and the possibility of a version of deconstruction that remains attentive to the distinction between belief and faith is an intriguing one.

[15] "Undecidability does not undo faith, hope and love but provides them with their condition of possibility, supplying their element, the night in which they are formed and performed." Caputo, "What Do I Love When I Love My God?" 313-314.

"prove" their faith, the manner in which knowledge differs from faith is often either misunderstood or left unarticulated. Thus, it is worth a moment to review how both pragmatism and postmodernism make this distinction.

Readers familiar with *The Will to Believe* will recall the three distinctions James makes with respect to decisions or choices put before us. "Options may be of several kinds. They may be 1, *living* or *dead*; 2, *forced* or *avoidable*; 3, *momentous* or *trivial*."[16] A living option is one in which assent is actually possible; thus, the conditions that make an option living are generally subjective. An option that is living for you might be dead for me, and vice versa. Forced options are those in which a choice cannot be avoided, a logical disjunction that presents us with "either A or B, but not 'both A and B' and not 'neither A nor B'." If someone invites you to a party you can choose whether or not to go, but cannot avoid choosing—whatever you do you will either attend the party or you will not. Finally, a momentous option is one in which the opportunity is unique, the stake is significant and the decision is irreversible. I have a friend who B.A.S.E. jumps (parachuting from fixed locations). The opportunity to make the first B.A.S.E. jump of, say, Shipton Spire in the Pakistani Karakorum is a momentous option. The opportunity is unique (only one person can be first), the stake significant (one's life), and the decision irreversible (once one makes the leap from the summit). James claims that options presented to us in the realm of faith must of course be living but are, in addition, both forced and momentous.[17] However, these distinctions alone do not allow us to differentiate knowledge and faith. What then distinguishes decisions based on knowledge from those based on faith? For James, very little it turns out.

James tells us that something is "true" when it agrees with "reality."[18] The problem is that it is difficult to find a consensus with respect to what "reality" is and what it means to "agree with" reality. Pragmatism avoids the problem of defining benchmark criteria that, once met, qualify something as true, by rejecting such a project altogether.

> The truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth *happens* to an idea. It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events. Its verity is in fact an event, a process: the process of its verifiying itself, its veri-*fication*.[19]

How is something verified? By proving its usefulness.[20] The process of verification is a process of "leading" whereby the ideas that put us into a better,

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[16] William James, *The Will to Believe* (New York: Dover Publications, 1956), 3.

[17] James, *The Will to Believe*, 26. I will contend that, while decisions of belief may also be forced decisions, the momentousness of a decision is what calls for faith. This is not a sharp distinction. Rather, as the stakes of a decision approach momentousness, the decision calls for faith rather than mere belief. Interestingly, however, one might question the momentousness of decisions of faith. Clearly, the choice to believe is unique and significant (it is my belief, my soul, etc.); however, is it irreversible?

[18] William James, *Pragmatism* (New York: Dover, 1995), 76 ff.

[19] Ibid., 77-78.

more useful, more pragmatic relationship with reality are the ones that are verified as true. Things are true insofar as they help us to get along in our understanding of and existing in reality.[21] Both things we know and things we believe can be *true*; however, the things we know are farther along the process of verification than the things we believe.[22]

Pragmatic verification is just that, pragmatic. I am comfortable stating that I *know* that I will die if I leap out of a plane at 30,000 feet without a parachute. This is because repeated experience falling shorter distances and repeated experience with other objects falling longer distances "verifies" the laws of physics that lead me to conclude that I will not survive impact with the earth while falling at terminal velocity. Although I can *imagine* a situation in which I survive the fall, I do not *actually* doubt the consequences of such an ill-conceived jump and, therefore, I avoid at all costs undertaking one. Of course, we can say anything we want, including that everything is absolutely dubitable; but, as Peirce notes, just because we can *say* something or *imagine* something does not mean we can *doubt* or *believe* it.

> Do you call it doubting to write down on a piece of paper that you doubt? If so, doubt has nothing to do with any serious business.[23]

> A person may, it is true, in the course of his studies, find reason to doubt what he began by believing; but in that case he doubts because he has a positive reason for it, and not on account of the Cartesian [or, I would add, Derridian] maxim. Let us not doubt in philosophy what we do not doubt in our hearts.[24]

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[20] The quotidian understanding of "knowledge" is something that is provable, verifiable, repeatable, demonstrable, that is, something objectively verifiable. James criticizes the scholastic sense of "objectively verifiable," which implies that I am unable to doubt a proposition. His use of "verification" is more in keeping with this quotidian sense, which is essentially the scientific sense of the term. See James, *The Will to Believe*, 13.

[21] James, *Pragmatism*, 23.

[22] Ibid., 76-91. Knowledge applies to concrete facts or to ideas and associations with sufficient empirical verification to be called "true." However, as verification and truth are things that happen to an idea rather than properties of it, the ideas we believe are not so different from the ideas we know and the former may in fact be as useful as the latter in pragmatic terms and, thus, in a sense may be equally true.

[23] C.S. Peirce, *The Essential Writings* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1998), 268. Peirce continues, "But do not make believe; if pedantry has not eaten all the reality out of you, recognize, as you must, that there is much that you do not doubt in the least. Now that which you do not at all doubt, you must and do regard as infallible, absolute truth."

[24] Ibid., 86. James agrees that there must be a real possibility of believing the proposition in question. Not everything we can say or imagine is really something that we can believe. For example, I can say that the Earth is flat and can even imagine a flat Earth; but, try as I might, I cannot really bring myself to believe that the Earth is flat. See James, *The Will to Believe*, 4-5. James's claim that we cannot choose to believe anything is in contrast to (or, at the very least, is evidence of a very different emphasis from) the deconstructive claim that "the impossible," the locus of faith, is infinitely translatable.

While we can imagine almost anything, it is practically impossible to doubt certain things. Thus, there are occasions where doubt itself is not a living option.[25]

"Belief" comes into play with respect to choices that, while "living" or possible, are still awaiting empirical "verification." Beliefs are still open to doubt and vacillation in a way that knowledge is not and this is the reason that belief is often characterized as a wager or a leap of faith. Now, this characterization must be viewed in light of James's claim that, strictly speaking, the only proposition that is fully certain is that "the present phenomena of consciousness exists."[26] This modified version of the Cartesian *cogito* is the only thing that is, by its very nature, certain. The more often empirical evidence confirms something, the more frequently we assent to something as "true" and the more entrenched this "truth" becomes in our consciousness, the more closely the given proposition approaches knowledge. At last, such a belief is no longer questioned; it forms part of the foundation or structure onto which we attach other truths. We interpret reality in terms of these entrenched truths rather than reinterpret them.[27]

In many ways, the deconstructive account of knowledge and truth is not that different from the pragmatic account. Deconstruction also views with skepticism any claim to knowledge of the truth in the sense of an absolute, eternal and unchanging Truth. Our claims to knowledge or our decisions between options are characterized by what deconstruction calls "undecidability," and this is especially true with respect to matters of religion, God, hospitality, responsibility and other examples of "*the* impossible."

"The best way to think about truth is to call it the best interpretation that anybody has come up with yet while conceding that no one knows what is coming next."[28] Undecidability does not imply indecision. Rather, it signifies the uncertainty inherent in faith and, ultimately, knowledge. Undecidability is not removed by making a decision; therefore, there is no "disjunction between faith and undecidability."[29] Indeed, "Derrida thinks that, precisely because of his notion of undecidability, everything begins and ends in faith."[30]

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[25] Of course, such a claim walks a fine line between dismissing affected Cartesian doubt on the one hand, and allowing, or worse encouraging, an unreflective or smug certainty concerning those matters we do not doubt "in our hearts," on the other. Hence the need for epistemological humility, addressed below.

[26] James, *The Will to Believe*, 15. Theoretically, of course, we can doubt almost anything. However, in a literal sense, there are many things that are not open to doubt (e.g., that JFK lived) or that are not open to belief (e.g., that the Earth is flat).

[27] "Our knowledge grows in spots. The spots may be large or small, but the knowledge never grows all over: some old knowledge remains what it was. . . . Our minds thus grow in spots; and like grease-spots, the spots spread. But we let them spread as little as possible: we keep unaltered as much of our old knowledge, as many of our old prejudices and beliefs, as we can. We patch and tinker more than we renew." James, *Pragmatism*, 64.

[28] John D. Caputo, *On Religion* (London: Routledge, 2001), 21.

[29] Caputo, "What Do I Love When I Love My God?" 296.

[30] Ibid.

> Deconstruction is filled with faith . . . but it always maintains a certain ironic distance from and alertness to the *specific* or determinate messianisms. . . . But that is *not* to say deconstruction leaves us stuck in undecidabilit. . . . We are always responding and at the same time always asking what we are responding to.[31]

Deconstruction acknowledges the necessity of deciding, but maintains that decisions are always made in and haunted by undecidability. Undecidability, in turn, leaves us in the desert of *khora*. Recalling Plato's *Timeaus* in light of Heidegger's *es gibt* and Levinas's *il y a*, *khora* is a word that signifies the ineffable, irreducible, atheological no-place of absolute alterity (*tout autre*).[32] Deliverance from this desert is always deferred, never achieved. Deliverance, salvation, messianic otherness, the impossible, these events are always to come (*à-venir*). The always-deferred nature of otherness (i.e., in this case, God) means that verification itself is infinitely deferred, which leaves us with choices that must be made in the resulting undecidability.[33] However, *faith* comes into play precisely where we cannot *know*. Undecidability calls for faith and faith presupposes undecidability. If something has been verified or is decidable on the basis of a process of verification, then faith is unnecessary. We simply follow through with the "programmatic" or "systematic" steps of proving or disproving a proposition and make our decision on the basis of this process and its result. Faith comes into play when there is no set path, no program to follow or system to consult.

Thus, while Jacques Derrida "quite rightly passes for an atheist," Caputo and others claim that deconstruction's passion for the impossible constitutes a "religion without religion," one in which: "*I do not know who I am or whether I believe in God*;" "*I do not know whether what I believe in is God or not*;" and, "*I do not know what I love when I love my God*."[34] Deconstruction claims to have faith, but in what it cannot say. On deconstruction's reading, a commitment to a historical faith community (i.e., a determinate claim about God or religious truth) is already hazardous (although ultimately necessary because unavoidable). Although the "messianic dissociation" of deconstruction is balanced by a

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[31] Ibid.

[32] "'This place is unique. It is the One without name. It gives rise to [*donne lieu*], perhaps, but without the least generosity, neither divine nor human. Not even the dispersion of cinders is promised there, not given death.' What did you expect to find in the desert?" Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears*, 159; citing Jacques Derrida, "*Foi et Savoir: Les deux sources de la 'religion' aux limites de la simple raison*," in Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo, eds., *La Religion* (Paris: Seuil, 1996), 86.

[33] Jean-Francois Lyotard referred to this situation as one of paralogy, a state of competing "language games" that attempt to order reality in terms of differing narratives, but without any legitimate system of comparing and evaluating incommensurable language games. Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, Min.: The University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

[34] For the three claims of a deconstructive "religion without religion," see Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears*, 331-332. For a contrasting view of "religion without religion," see Treanor, "The God Who May Be: Quis ergo amo cum Deum meum amo?"

"historical association," the determinate nature of the latter is clearly a threat to the indeterminate nature of the former in the mind of deconstructionists.[35] Better simply to love "*the* impossible"[36] because, while we "cannot say what is a translation of what . . . the point is that it does not matter."[37]

Belief is not Faith

I noted that many theists would acknowledge that they cannot "prove" their religious faith; however, it is equally true that most people are not as comfortable as philosophers and theologians in distinguishing knowledge from faith. Certainly many religious people would be uncomfortable saying something like "I don't know God exists" without significant qualification. The complex psychological reasons that we feel that something is not "really true" if we cannot "prove" it are too numerous to address here; however, part of the objection no doubt lies in the reduction of faith to mere belief, opinion, inclination or preference. By all accounts faith is something qualitatively different from the belief that the US team will make it out of group play in the next World Cup, the opinion that Hemmingway's *The Snows of Kilimanjaro* is a great short story, or the preference for Indian food rather than Indonesian food. Clearly, undecidability is a factor in each of these instances and, moreover, it must be acknowledged that, insofar as faith requires a leap, faith is characterized by the same undecidability as belief.[38] However, while both belief and faith are undecidable, we ought to ask if all non-verifiable beliefs qualify as faith or if belief is distinguishable from faith as faith is from knowledge.

Undecidable propositions, precisely because verification is lacking, require a leap in order to assent—a leap that, by definition, may fail. For example, one may assent to a proposition only to find, over the long haul, that one is incapable of the volitional contribution that faith requires. Alternatively, the proposition to which one assents may simply prove to be wrong. In either case the leap of faith is ultimately frustrated. However, in the case of the existence of God, talk of faith "awaiting verification" and requiring a leap that

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[35] Caputo, "What Do I Love When I Love My God?" 303.

[36] However, loving the undecidability of *khora* without loving God in some determinate sense is something like those people who, terrified by the notion of committed love, convince themselves that being in love with being-in-love is the same as being in love. Augustine also struggled with this problem (*Confessions*, Book II). The non-committal person who loves the state of loving without loving determinate others misses out on what is most significant about love. God is love but, *pace* Caputo (see *On Religion*, 4-5), not all love is God.

[37] Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, 338.

[38] Although not the focus of this paper, it is worth nothing that faith and belief may also be distinguished by their objects. Gabriel Marcel speaks of the difference between "belief that" and "belief in," the former corresponding to what we will call belief and the latter to what we will call faith. Properly speaking, we do not have faith "that" something is the case. This would be the sphere of belief. Faith is ultimately faith "in" someone. Belief that describes a state of affairs (a "that") that can be demonstrated or verified, proven true or false. Faith describes a relationship and is not susceptible to such analysis. See, for example, Gabriel Marcel, *Creative Fidelity*, trans. Robert Rosthal (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Company, 1964), 135.

somehow lacks certainty leads, perhaps inexorably, to thinking of faith in terms of a gamble of sorts, a wager made on the available (partial) evidence on which one stakes one's immortal soul (if the theist proves to be right) or one's freedom, independence, and dignity (if the atheist proves to be right).[39]

People, especially theists, are likely to be less than comfortable characterizing faith as some grand existential-metaphysical game of dice in which something is true merely because it is our "best current guess" or because it is the "expedient" way to think.[40] Faith that is nothing more than a wager or best guess made on the basis of a cost-benefit analysis seems, somehow, to lack sincerity. As James points out,

> We feel that faith . . . adopted willfully after such a mechanical calculation would lack the inner soul of faith's reality; and if we were ourselves in the place of the Deity, we should probably take particular pleasure in cutting off believers of this pattern from their infinite reward.[41]

Mechanical belief based *only* on the calculation that (1) something is theoretically possible, and (2) there is risk of significant loss if I do not assent and no significant risk if I do assent, falls short of faith. Faith is more than hedging your bets. A leap of faith requires something else in order to earn the name "faith" rather than "belief," "guess," "opinion," or "wager."

In addition to the liveliness of the option James asserts that the religious believer must possess a passional disposition or temperament toward faith.[42] This passional disposition, in turn, allows one to commit to a proposition with sincerity above and beyond the cost-benefit analysis of mechanical calculation. Such sincerity allows one the conviction that the leap beyond verification and objective evidence *will* succeed, that the faith *is in fact true*. All faith is a kind of belief, but not all belief is faith. The general class of belief applies to those propositions awaiting verification; however, the subclass of faith is characterized by the (full) conviction with which the leap of affirmation is made.

On my reading it is this characteristic that makes faith more difficult, and in at least some cases more excellent, than knowledge. "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe" (John 20:29). Knowledge applies to things that have been verified and God, despite millennia of philosophical and theological effort, remains beyond verification. The fact that faith is not knowledge is not the flaw of faith, but its glory. Faith is a passion for, as deconstruction says, "the impossible" and "the

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[39] A coarse reading of Pascal would counsel adopting a theistic "faith" for no other reason than the notion that if the theist is right, he gains immortality while, if he is wrong, he loses nothing.
[40] Except, perhaps, in scientific inquiry. James, *Pragmatism*, 84-87.
[41] James, *The Will to Believe*, 6.
[42] Ibid., 9-22 passim. The question, of course, becomes if, when, how and why someone's temperament can change.

condition of this passion is non-knowing . . . the inescapable element in which decisions are reached, which intensifies their passion."[43]

Generally, however, deconstruction has failed to adequately distinguish between faith and belief because it ignores or misunderstands the relationship between faith and conviction, frequently conflating conviction with fanaticism.[44] Deconstruction not only views with skepticism any claim to verification, it rejects the very idea of verification as fundamentally impossible—the other (the phenomenon in question, God or whoever) is *always a-venir*. Thus, deconstruction also views with suspicion anyone who claims to have made a choice for a particular faith—Buddhist, Christian, Jewish, Muslim, democratic, socialist, or any other—who does not simultaneously intone the mantra of undecidability: *"Tout autre est tout autre. Je ne sais pas. Il faut croire*."[45] Ultimately, one gets the feeling that deconstruction's passion is not for faith in the midst of undecidability, but for undecidability itself. Deconstruction loves the impossibility, loves the undecidability—"the impossibility is the object of our love and passion"—rather than loving the possibility of the impossible, the decision that moves beyond the impossibility.[46]

In contrast, James sees the unbreakable link between faith and conviction, or willingness to act on belief:

> Philosophy has, to a large degree, ignored the problem of faith. Faith means belief in something concerning which doubt is still theoretically *possible*; and as *the test of belief is willingness to act*, one may say that faith is the readiness to act in a cause the prosperous issue of which is not known to us in advance.[47]

If belief is measured by a willingness to act, the willingness to act irrevocably (e.g., leap out the door of a plane) requires the greatest conviction and it is *this* kind of belief that we call faith.[48] Risking a truly momentous stake, such as one's

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[43] Caputo, *On Religion*, 19.

[44] This is particularly true in deconstructive replies to critics, where any determinate claim about the impossible (God) is characterized as the first step on a slippery slope from conviction to certainty to intolerance and fanaticism. See, for example: Caputo's "What Do I Love When I Love My God?" *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*; idem, *On Religion*; idem, "Richard Kearney's Enthusiasm" in *Modern Theology* 18, no. 1, (January 2002): 94-95.

[45] "Every other is wholly other. I do not know. It is necessary to believe." My objection is not, ultimately, to the latter assertion (I do not know; it is necessary to believe) but to the former (every other is wholly other).

[46] Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears*, 332. Moving through aporia does not necessarily mean the removal of mystery or ambiguity, or arriving at certitude. See my *Aspects of Alterity: Levinas, Marcel and the Contemporary Debate* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 227ff. especially 228.

[47] James, *The Will to Believe*, 90.

[48] Regarding leaps and commitment, see Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), and idem, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983); William James, *The Will to Believe*, 59; Gabriel Marcel, *Creative Fidelity* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Co., 1964), 147-174 passim.

life or one's soul, requires the conviction of faith. Socrates drank the hemlock "calmly and easily" because he had faith that the soul was deathless.[49] Belief, even with the highest degree of likelihood, remains a mere wager because nothing momentous is risked; but faith "wagers" everything and, therefore, requires the full commitment that makes a leap possible. Even with full conviction, a leap may fail; however, without full conviction a leap will undoubtedly fail. This is why faith aspires to be unconditional.

Decisions of faith are made "as if" they are certain and this "as if" is significant, even essential.[50] This "as if certain" quality of faith is what makes faith a commitment rather than an inclination, and this should be particularly clear in a quite common example of faith: faith in another person. For example, one cannot enter into a marriage and say, "I do, till death do us part" with the unspoken parenthetical "unless you are crippled, or I lose interest, or someone younger comes along." If that were the case the commitment, the faith in the other person, would be devoid of meaning. A commitment must be made "as if" it is not susceptible to doubt or revision, although, of course, there are in reality circumstances that might well alter such a decision after it is made.

However, just as there is no clear demarcation between belief and knowledge, there is none between belief and faith. Belief approaches faith in the measure that the commitment approaches the unconditional. Gabriel Marcel was on the mark when he wrote:

> When I commit myself, I grant in principle that the commitment will not again be put into question. And it is clear that this active volition not to question something again, intervenes as an essential element in the determination of what in fact will be the case . . . it bids me to invent a certain *modus vivendi*.[51]

In a similar vein, James noted that leaps of faith require conviction (which we are calling the "as if") or they are doomed to fail.

> Suppose, for instance, that you are climbing a mountain, and have worked yourself into a position from which the only escape is by a terrible leap. Have faith that you can successfully make it, and your feet are nerved to its accomplishment. But mistrust yourself, and think of all the sweet things you have heard the scientists say of *maybes*, and you will hesitate so long that, at

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[49] Plato, "Phaedo" in *Five Dialogues*, G.M.A. Grube trans. (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett, 1981). Socrates may have been wrong or may have been right; each of us will come to know in time. The unconfirmable nature of the question necessitates a leap; however, the stakes involved dictate that only a committed leap (i.e., only faith) or a defeated resignation would allow one to remain calm in the hour of death. Clearly, Socrates was not defeated.

[50] Which is precisely why we would consider someone who jumps from religious tradition to religious tradition with the frequency that others change clothes disingenuous in their "faith."

[51] Marcel, *Creative Fidelity*, 162. This *modus vivendi*, informed by fidelity to or faith in the other person is a rudimentary form of what Marcel calls "creative fidelity," which is an essential element of any commitment and, thus, of any faith.

> last, all unstrung and trembling, and launching yourself in a moment of despair, you roll into the abyss. In such a case (and it belongs to an enormous class) . . . refuse to believe and you will be right, for you shall irretrievably perish.[52]

The commitment makes the faith. Faith is distinguished by the extent to which it *aspires to* and the degree to which it *approaches* "unconditionality."[53] Here we might look to Paul Ricoeur's beautiful comment on his own Christian faith: "a chance transformed into a destiny by a continuous choice."[54]

Of course, if leaps of faith are made "as if" they are certain, we must be doubly on guard against the possibility of fanaticism and intolerance. It is conviction and certitude that allows suicide bombers to carry out attacks against innocent noncombatants. However, the commitment of faith need not lead us to the conclusion that faith is synonymous with fanaticism. Fanaticism is the result of thinking that the conviction of faith is the same as the certainty of knowledge, that the "as if" is a "definitively is." However, "in fact fidelity can never be unconditional . . . it aspires to unconditionality."[55] While a leap of faith must be made as if it is certain, all honest and reasonable people must also acknowledge that a leap of faith remains a leap and, as such, it may actually fail (i.e., the person making the leap may be wrong). Fanaticism is essentially a problem of hubris and, as such, is combated by humility. Each person must combat the natural human "tendency to absolutism" by balancing faith—which, because the leap is made "as if" it were certain, runs the risk of sliding toward fanaticism—with an acute awareness of the incomplete, partial and confused nature of human understanding—which counsels humility and reminds us that we must always remain open to new evidence and interpretations.[56]

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[52] James, *The Will to Believe*, 59. The "enormous class" of cases certainly includes both faith in the religious sense and faith in the sense of faith in other persons (the latter being the very example James uses to illustrate his point).

[53] The use of "approaches" is essential. The unconditional, strictly speaking, is perhaps not even possible. However, as commitment approaches unconditional commitment, belief becomes faith, just as belief becomes knowledge as verification approaches certainty. In either case there is no sharp demarcation where belief ends and faith or knowledge begins. Nevertheless, this does not mean the verification or commitment is useless as a tool for determining what qualifies as knowledge or faith. Although there will be borderline cases that are hard to determine, some cases with sufficiently high levels of verification or commitment will clearly qualify as knowledge or faith and some cases with sufficiently lows levels of either will clearly be cases of belief.

[54] Paul Ricoeur, *Living Up to Death*, trans. David Pellauer (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 62.

[55] Gabriel Marcel, *Homo Viator: Introduction to a Metaphysic of Hope*, trans. Emma Crawford (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1962), 133.

[56] There is ample evidence to suggest that this is a very difficult task. James claims that we are all "absolutists by instinct" (James, *The Will to Believe*, 14). Moreover, we noted above James's belief that we tend to "tinker" with our established beliefs rather than radically question them (see note 27 above). Only continued reflection keeps this tendency at bay. I acknowledge that what I am here proposing as a distinction between knowledge and faith goes beyond what James has said and that "irrevocable commitment" can edge dangerously close to "closed-mindedness." However, the deepest faith can resemble fanaticism insofar as both require a commitment and submission to the

One of the challenges facing the postmodern treatment of religion is to adequately account for the conviction of faith in a way that does not imply that all undecidable circumstances call for faith (as opposed to belief) or immediately conflate conviction with fanaticism and a cessation of reflection. Deconstruction has done a laudable job in elaborating the structural fallibility of human understanding, the undecidability that haunts our knowledge and beliefs. However, in doing so it has tended to reduce faith to a mere wager. It implies that faith made as a leap (i.e., made with conviction) betrays undecidability and is therefore at best programmatic and at worst fanatical.[57] In the midst of uncertainty, deconstruction does decide—undecidability is not indecision—but in such a way that the uncertain and tentative nature of the decision is the relentless focus. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the conditionality is more important than the commitment itself; it doesn't matter so much *what* you believe, only *how* you believe. However, surely both are significant.

Given the claims made in this paper, we might say that while deconstruction *believes* in the impossible, it does not have *faith* in it. Deconstruction makes a valid point when it notes that questions about God require a leap of faith that is qualitatively different than the plodding steps of demonstrable proof. However, it is reasonable to ask whether or not deconstruction can make this leap, because a noncommittal leap of faith is doomed to fail. Deconstruction implies that those who make a committed leap of faith fear the darkness of *khora* and are unwilling to stand before the abyss of undecidability, yet deconstruction never works up the nerve to leap or, if it does, the most it can muster is a half-hearted lunge that, lacking commitment, is doomed to fail qua leap.

If fanaticism is not faith because it pretends to know the impossible and thus confuses faith and knowledge, is it equally true that deconstruction is not faith because it pretends that faith is nothing more than a decision made without knowledge and, thus, confuses faith and belief? The first errs in thinking too much, so to speak, of faith (by thinking that faith is, or even needs to be, equivalent to knowledge because only knowledge is true); the second fails by thinking too little of it (and implying that all unverifiable beliefs are faith). While deconstruction is right to make a distinction between knowledge and faith, it fails to make the equally important distinction between faith and belief.

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perceived truth. Faith is not distinguished from fanaticism by its level of commitment or certainty, but by its humility. The faithful and fanatic are both committed, but the fanatic has an overly optimistic and confident view of his own knowledge while the faithful person does not. Faith, no matter how certain and committed, must acknowledge that it is not knowledge (and even if it were, human knowledge is limited), and that doubt or error remains a theoretical possibility in any faith. Again, it is here that the difference between my own position and that of deconstruction should be reemphasized. My objection is, ultimately, to the claim that *tout autre est tout autre*, that we can know nothing of the other. Thus, I would modify the deconstructive mantra. *Je ne sais pas absolument. Il faut croire.* I do not know the other absolutely and definitively, but I can know, partially and imperfectly, any other I actually encounter. *Par conséquent, il faut croire*.

[57] See Caputo "What Do I Love When I Love My God?" and, idem, "Richard Kearney's Enthusiasm."

The non-committal (though not indecisive) nature of deconstruction is, perhaps, not unlike the philosophy of W.K. Clifford, who James rebukes for avoiding error first and seeking truth second "like a general informing his soldiers that it is better to keep out of battle forever than to risk a single wound."[58] Like Derrida and Caputo, James believes that truth is in some sense a moving target; however, he also makes an important distinction between two epistemological impulses: avoiding error and seeking truth.

> There are two ways of looking at our duty in the matter of opinion—and ways entirely different, and yet ways about whose difference the theory of knowledge seems hitherto to have shown very little concern. *We must have the truth*; and *we must avoid error*. These are our first and great commandments as would-be knowers; but they are not two ways of stating an identical commandment, they are two separable laws. Although it may indeed happen that when we believe the truth *A*, we escape as an incidental consequence from believing the falsehood *B*, it hardly ever happens that by merely disbelieving *B* we necessarily believe *A*.[59]

The problem with focusing on the desire to avoid error rather than the desire to seek truth is simply that it will not get you anywhere. Skepticism is useful, even essential; however, elevated to the level of first commandment it is something of a non-starter.

Because deconstruction has abandoned the notion that there are absolute truths, the most it can muster is a very effective way to avoid error. In contrast, James allows that there may well be truth, that we ought to seek it out and that, until we know such truth (if we ever can) we must get by on faith.[60] Peirce goes even further, optimistically asserting that there is truth and that we will one day grasp it: "The opinion that is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate is what we mean by the truth, and the object represented in this opinion is the real."[61] Although the difference between seeking truth and avoiding error might be construed as merely a difference in approach, it is

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[58] James, *The Will to Believe*, 18-19.

[59] Ibid., 18. Of course, James also suggests that the tendency to seek truth or avoid error is a fundamentally dispositional one. Thus, just as some people are "tough minded" and others are "tender minded," some people fear error and others desire truth. In either case, the point is not to choose one of the extremes, as if being tough-minded or desiring the truth are entirely unproblematic. The soundest approach is no doubt a blend of these positions.

[60] Ibid., 1-31 passim. James also notes that there is a difference between knowing something (truth) and knowing that we know it (certainty). Because there is a difference between knowing a truth and knowing that we know it, we ought also to remain open to reevaluating our faith (and knowledge), based on new information and new interpretations.

[61] C.S. Peirce, "How to Make Our Ideas Clear," in C.S, Peirce, *The Essential Writings* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1998), 155. Lest the word "fate" be adopted by absolutists or attacked by relativists, Peirce points out that "fate means merely that which is sure to come true, and can [in no way] be avoided. It is a superstition to suppose that a certain sort to events are ever fated, and it is another to suppose that the word fate can never be freed from its superstitious taint. We are all fated to die." Ibid.

symptomatic of an underlying difference in opinion as to the *possibility* of truth and it has significant ramifications for our ability to commit to a leap and, thus, for our ability to move beyond belief to faith. Deconstruction's account of faith, while similar to the pragmatic account, can take something from James, who recognized both the contingency of human knowledge and the conviction of faith.

Leaps of Faith and the Traditional Proofs for the Existence of God

If the traditional proofs for the existence of God are not certain, in the sense that they may leave reasonable inquirers for whom faith is living option in doubt regarding the existence of God, it nevertheless seems that there are ways that such proofs might relate to the leap of faith. One legitimate use, although perhaps not the most obvious one, is in buttressing, as it were, faith. Michael Vertin's contribution to this volume suggests that one's presuppositions, which are certainly different pre- and post-conversion, alter the way one perceives the proofs. Thus, having made the initial leaps of faith, the proofs will support future leaps—for, as Kierkegaard notes, the leap is not made once and for all; leaps must be made incessantly. "Faith [is] a task for a whole lifetime."[62] In fact, the proofs are no doubt exceptionally useful in this role precisely because they are more efficacious for believers then they are for skeptics. Having made the leap of faith, it becomes easier—though by no means certain—to repeat the same leap.

Of course, there is a presumption that the proofs of the existence of God would also be useful tools for persuading skeptics. Thus, the second and more obvious use of the proofs is as a tool to contest unbelief. However, this proves problematic because the traditional "proofs" of the existence of God are no such thing. While the proofs of God's existence may serve to buttress the faith of believers, the skeptic is generally satisfied with nothing less than demonstrable, irrefutable proof of God's existence and, therefore, is generally not satisfied with the traditional proofs. In other words, these arguments do not *prove* the existence of God any more thoroughly than Ockham's Razor *disproves* it. Referring again to Vertin's essay, one way we might put this is to point out that a proof may be both rationally coherent, and philosophically and theologically relevant, and nevertheless fail, existentially, to move me. As James notes, faith must be a living option for me.

Nevertheless, the traditional proofs—ontological, teleological, cosmological, etc.—can still serve a useful purpose in a religious climate characterized by various shades of fideism. If the traditional proofs for the existence of God are not sufficient conditions for the establishment of faith, they can nevertheless be of use in discussion with both skeptics and believers. First, reason, including the proofs, can help to ready a person for the leap, at least in some cases. The proofs can bring us to the precipice, as it were, and even give some of us a running start. Nevertheless, even with such a start, at the precipice

[62] Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 7.

each individual must leap and fling herself toward an unknown, in the sense we have established, destination. Second, reason, including the proofs, can help to buttress the faith of believers struggling with doubt. The proofs are likely to be of even greater use in sustaining the ongoing leaps of those who, because they already believe, have presuppositions congenial to the proofs. Nevertheless, again, the proofs do not establish indubitable knowledge and, therefore do not obviate the leap. Faith cannot be sustained by reason alone, but only by a leap, made unconditionally and repeatedly.

Does the uncertainty this study takes as given represent the failure of reason or the glory of faith? Perhaps the failure of the traditional proofs for the existence of God qua incontestable proofs is not lamentable. Rather, with a postmodern appreciation of uncertainty and mystery, this failure allows us to see that the complex and ambiguous nature of faith is not its defect, but its glory.

Knowledge requires verification. Belief is assent to something that is not verified. Faith is a particular kind of belief that entails a leap with *commitment*. At the limit, such a leap constitutes an "irrevocable" wager on which "everything" is staked.[63] Faith differs from knowledge in what I can verify of the proposition (i.e., in terms of certainty) while faith differs from belief in what I give to the proposition (i.e., commitment). Thus, faith can be roughly demarcated by three claims: (1) faith is not knowledge (uncertainty); (2) faith is not mere belief (commitment); and (3) faith need not be fanaticism (humility). With a proper humility, faith is capable of being *both* committed and critical—a *full commitment* made by a *fallible* person *aware* of her fallibility.

[63] As in James's climbing example. This is perhaps why faith alters who one is while belief does not. In the extreme case, one stakes one's very being on the leap of faith and, therefore, in the event of failure or error, one would be required to revaluate oneself at a very fundamental level.