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PI'S WAGER: LIFE OF PI'S PRAGMATIC WAGER

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Life of Pi is the story of a fourteen-year-old boy who survives a shipwreck on a voyage from India to Canada alone on a lifeboat with a tiger for 227 days. The "author's note" at the beginning of the 2001 novel by Canadian writer Yann Martel says this is "a story that will make you believe in God." The 2012 film adaptation by director Ang Lee emphasizes this dimension of the film by using a dramatization of the author's note as a framing device for the film and repeating the claim that the story "will make you believe in God" at least three times at various points in the film. It is tempting, then, to take *Life of Pi* as a kind of argument for the existence of God. But the film is ambiguous on multiple levels. Ambiguity is bad for a philosophical argument but not necessarily for a work of art. In fact, the ambiguity in the film is its most interesting feature and can be used by Christian apologists to open up fruitful discussions about the nature of faith.

A HOUSE WITH MANY ROOMS?

The most obvious target for the Christian apologist is the film's pre-shipwreck sequence in which Pi claims to be a Hindu, a Christian, and a Muslim at the same time. He says, "Faith is a house with many rooms." Christians are more likely to agree with Pi's atheist father, who says, "Believing in everything at the same time is the same as believing in nothing at all." Of course, the film portrays Pi's father as a reductionist unable to see the wonder in life. He's a proponent of scientism and metaphysical naturalism. Pi's Hindu mother is portrayed more positively. "Science teaches us what is outside," she says, "but not what is in the heart."

The film seems to make a standard relativistic claim: all religions are equally valid. It doesn't take much theological reflection to see that this view is untenable. Christianity and Islam both make clear and emphatic exclusivist claims, so one cannot be a good Christian *and* a good Muslim at the same time. On the other hand, here we have the film's first ambiguity. While one could certainly interpret the film as claiming that Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism are all paths to the same truth, one could also interpret the film as simply expressing the standard Hindu belief that there are many expressions of the same ultimate reality—God comes in the form of many gods. Instead

of being a bad Christian, Pi could simply be a good Hindu. It is perfectly acceptable on Hindu grounds to find truth in other religions.¹ At this point, the apologist will have to respond with a general defense of the exclusivity of Christianity instead of pointing out Pi's inconsistencies. Thus, approaching the film from this perspective takes the conversation away from the film itself and toward other issues.

The Better Story

A more fruitful avenue for apologetic conversation is to focus on the film's ending. As the film progresses, the story gets more and more unbelievable. At one point Pi discovers an island made of carnivorous plants populated by thousands of meerkats! The film ends with Pi finally arriving in Mexico, where a team of Japanese insurance agents investigating the shipwreck interviews him. The investigators initially reject Pi's story as incredible. Here, perhaps unfortunately for the apologist, the film skips the section of the novel where Pi defends his faith by answering the investigators' objections. Just a hint of this sequence is left in the film, when one agent questions Pi's claim that bananas float.

Despite Pi's ability to answer their objections, the investigators remain unconvinced, and Pi offers them an alternative story in which the tiger symbolizes his own inner capacity for violence, which allowed him to survive at sea but which frightens and shames him in retrospect. In contrast to the first story, which implies the existence of a personal God who miraculously answers prayer, the alternate story does not ask us to believe anything supernatural. It is more "realistic" (at least as realism is defined by metaphysical naturalism), but it is also darker and more pessimistic, revealing human beings to be nothing more than animals. After presenting the two stories, Pi asks, "Which story do you prefer?" The investigators answer that the miraculous story is "the better story," and Pi replies, "And so it goes with God." Here we have the payoff to Pi's initial claim that his story will "make you believe in God." Here, too, we have a couple of the film's most interesting ambiguities.

First, there is the obvious ambiguity of whether Pi was on the lifeboat with a literal tiger or whether the tiger story was an allegory. Viewers may want to debate what really happened on the boat, but the film isn't interested in that question. Pi doesn't ask which story is more reasonable or more likely to be *true*, but which story we *prefer*. Thus the film seems to imply that objective truth is irrelevant and one can simply choose whichever story is subjectively more attractive. Here it seems significant that when Pi says his story will make you believe in God, he does *not* say his story will make you believe God *exists*. So one important interpretive possibility is that the film means to affirm theological fictionalism. On this view, God is like a fictional character. Just as Pi's mother claimed that science tells us objective facts and religion tells us the subjective meaning of those facts, the metanarrative told by religion can be existentially meaningful even if it is ontologically false—spiritual truth simply has nothing to do with historical truth.² Perhaps something like this is what Voltaire meant when he remarked, "If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him."

MORE THAN A REFLECTION

The fictionalist theme runs through the film. When he first sees the tiger at the zoo, Pi is convinced he can see the animal's soul when he looks into its eyes. His father sees this as pure anthropomorphic sentimentalism. "When you look into his eyes," he says, "you are seeing your own emotions reflected back to you." At the end of the film, after having (allegedly) spent more than half a year on a lifeboat with the tiger, Pi claims the tiger is "my fierce friend, the one who kept me alive." This line makes no sense literally, since the tiger does nothing but threaten Pi's life. But taken as a symbol of Pi's own inner aggression, the tiger could be said to have saved Pi's life by giving him the will to survive. Even in the first, fantastical story, Pi is forced to eat fish despite being a lifelong vegetarian. And in the second, naturalistic story, Pi is forced to kill another human being in self-defense.

As a symbol of aggression—one's sinful, or "animal," nature—it makes sense that Pi would say the tiger "can't be tamed, but with God's help, he can be trained." In the Hobbesian state of nature, alone on the sea, Pi's animal nature is necessary for survival, but back in civilization, religion is what allows Pi to control his darker urges, keeping the tiger hidden and contained. In the opening sequence, Pi says Christianity taught him love, and Islam taught him the brotherhood of all humanity, both things he hadn't found in Hinduism. More importantly, religion—Hinduism in particular, which Pi says taught him the importance of myth—allows us to see ourselves as something other than simply Darwinian animals struggling for survival. After telling his story, Pi says, "I have to believe that there was more than my reflection looking back." Here he has flipped his father's original warning on its head. Where his father said Pi was projecting humanity onto the animal, Pi worries that, from his father's "scientific" point of view, humans themselves would just be animals. Religious myth is his way of avoiding that sort of reductionism.

On this reading, the atheistic story is technically the truth. But the fiction of the theistic story allows us to go on living. We need a mythology to give meaning to our lives even if the mythology is false. Religious mythology is necessary for moral inspiration. It is a kind of self-fulfilling deception in which we tell ourselves that human nature is good and it *becomes* good. The atheistic story alone requires us to be nothing more than animals, and if we believe this, we consequently devolve into mere animals. Fictionalism is incompatible with Christianity, which takes actual historical events as its basis. But perhaps it can be helpful in showing why atheism isn't attractive: if atheism were true, we would have an existential reason to convince ourselves it was false, for atheism is unlivable.

"THE WILL TO BELIEVE"

Yet, again, there is an alternate way of reading the film. While the fictionalist interpretation fits the text very well, one could also read the film as being compatible with theological realism—the view that God is not a fictional character but is an ontologically real being. It is important to keep in mind that, according to the film, we *can't know* whether Pi's story is literally true or not. Pi proclaims explicitly, "No one can

prove which is the true story.” Recall Pi’s ability to answer the investigators’ objections to his story. So it is not that we can simply ignore the evidence and believe whatever we want. Instead, our subjective preference of one belief over the other is only justified in those cases where the objective evidence is inconclusive. In this way, we can read the argument of *Life of Pi* as a “pragmatic argument” for belief in God along the lines of Pascal’s “Wager” or William James’s “Will to Believe.”³

Most Christian apologists wouldn’t agree that the evidence is in fact inconclusive. On the contrary, most apologists think there is enough evidence to prove the truth of Christianity. Nevertheless, pragmatic arguments can be helpful when one’s conversation partner is not persuaded by classical theistic arguments and (perhaps incorrectly) believes ~~that~~ the evidence is inconclusive.

On this way of thinking, the film is about two possible worldviews: theism and atheism, that equally account for the evidence, but one of which is more imaginatively attractive. Which one is a “better story,” Pi asks. Which one would you rather be true? The argument is that, if theism and atheism were equally coherent, we would be justified in believing theism is true, because it is more beautiful and more deeply satisfying to our innate human longing for meaning.

EXISTENTIAL REASONS

Pi’s pragmatic argument should not be confused with C. S. Lewis’s “argument from desire” in which he argues that the existence of God is the best explanation for the innate human longing for transcendent meaning.⁴ As Clifford Williams has recently argued, Lewis is actually claiming that our desires count as *evidence* for the existence of God.⁵ Williams draws a distinction between Lewis’s evidential argument from desire and what Williams calls “the existential argument from desire.” The existential argument goes like this: (1) We desire/need meaning in life, (2) Faith in God satisfies that desire/need, (3) therefore we are justified in having faith in God.⁶ *Life of Pi*’s argument can be read this way. And Williams is clear that the existential argument can be used to *complement*, not simply to *replace* traditional evidential apologetics: “Satisfaction of need legitimately draws us to faith, but reason must be involved in this drawing....Need without reason is blind, but reason without need is sterile.”⁷

So Williams’s argument is that even if there is convincing evidence for the truth of Christianity, we *still* need existential arguments to help us acquire and sustain genuine faith (as opposed to mere intellectual assent). I don’t have space to evaluate Williams’s argument here, but if he is correct, then *Life of Pi* could play a valuable role in generating discussion about human nature’s innate longing for meaning—a discussion that, if successful, could open a seeker’s heart and mind to a consideration of more traditional evidential apologetic arguments.

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NOTES

- 1 Anantanand Rambachan, "Hinduism and the Encounter with Other Faiths," *Global Dialogue* 2 no. 1 (Winter 2000). Available at <http://www.worlddialogue.org/content.php?id=59>.
- 2 For a classic statement of theological fictionalism, see Don Cupitt, *Taking Leave of God* (Norwich, England: SCM Press, 1980).
- 3 Jeff Jordan, *Pascal's Wager: Pragmatic Arguments and Belief in God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006). See also Jordan's article, "Pragmatic Arguments and Belief in God," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2011 edition), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2011/entries/pragmatic-belief-god/>.
- 4 C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 136–37.
- 5 Clifford Williams, *Existential Reasons for Belief in God: A Defense of Desires and Emotions for Faith* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 49.
- 6 Ibid, 32.
- 7 Ibid, 12.