Gambling from a Weak Hand: Radical Skepticism and an Ethics of Uncertainty

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I. Introduction: Epistemic Prologue to Ethics

Ethical questions saddled with problems of knowledge.

Ethics are a deeply political category. Since they are always concerned with right and wrong and attendant standards of conduct, ethics are often associated with issues of power, governance, and justice. Questions within the category of ethics have often been saddled with problems of knowledge. Understanding how we ought to act is frequently obstructed by the difficulties in meeting the stringent standards of knowledge, which is considered to be more demanding than belief, opinion, or faith. The difficulty in meeting even lenient criteria for authentic knowing can call into question the necessity, or even the advisability, of acting ethically. The very possibility of ethics is jeopardized by the seeming absence of epistemological foundations. If our claims to knowledge are tenuous or, as skeptics suggest, unfounded, building knowledge of right and wrong is sharply hazardous.

Religions, particularly Western religions in the Judeo-Christian-Islamic traditions, attempt to answer this problem by appealing to a moral authority, a deity. Thus, the answer to the question, why should I act rightly, is often addressed by the evocation of a god. Purely philosophical systems of knowledge cannot answer in that manner because, insofar as they are heterodox, philosophic systems are compelled to question the

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veracity of claims to knowledge. Religion, therefore, attempts to account for this problem with belief or faith, rather than actual knowledge.

Ethics has been traditionally burdened by a particular problem of knowledge, which I describe as the failure to meet the requirements of justified, true belief. On the one hand, philosophy cannot conjure a sufficient proof to validate any ethical imperative. Because philosophy lacks the wisdom it loves, there is no necessary answer to the question of why one ought to behave in a certain way. Religion, on the other hand, seeks to answer this question, but ultimately resorts to faith, not knowledge. I do not wish to portray neatly discrete and autonomous categories of religion and philosophy as though there is no overlap between the two. This is simply to say that philosophy, as a perpetual activity of questioning, seems at odds with faith. We might, in this instance, agree with the political philosopher Leo Strauss (1959, 221), who says that philosophy is the effort to replace the opinion of all things, which is to be found in the sphere of politics, with the knowledge of all things. If true, philosophy has assigned itself a quixotic task.

Because epistemology presents an obstacle, ethical frameworks have tended toward those informed by a theological basis and those formed by an ontological basis. Thomas Aquinas exemplifies the construction of theologically driven ethics. In his *Summa Theologiae,* he argues that right action is that which is mindful of God. Right behavior is always part of a relationship with God, or as he explains:

> Now every injury we inflict on others is of itself opposed to God's friendship, which moves us rather to will good to our fellowmen. So to do injustice is of its nature a fatal sin (Aquinas, 1989, 386).

To do wrong is to be opposed to God; to act rightly is to conform to God's will. The basis for Aquinas' ethics is the knowledge of God from which the inspiration and consequences of right and wrong action ultimately stem. Theories excluding or circumventing the concern for theological bases have fared no better in producing an epistemologically stable foundation for ethics. Jean-Paul Sartre (1956, 795) insisted that ontology could not determine ethics.[1] In this sense, he was re-

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[1] Specifically, Sartre says, "Ontology itself cannot formulate ethical pre-

ferring to the absence of a necessary link between the nature of existence and a specific program of ethics. Yet, Sartre remains an example of ethics informed by ontology because, for Sartre, ontology mandates responsibility. Sartre explains that

> man being condemned to be free carries the weight of the whole world on his shoulders; he is responsible for the world and for himself as a way of being. We are taking the word "responsibility" in its ordinary sense as "consciousness (of) being the incontestable author of an event or of an object" (Sartre 1982, 52).

For Sartre, the individual is entirely his or her own creation.

Because the existence of a human subject precedes its essence, the individual is entirely his or her own creation. As such, the human world, for Sartre, is nothing but the aggregate of self-creating human beings. Humans are, therefore, responsible for their own choices and the world they create.

While the utility and coherence of theological and ontological bases for ethics can be productive, I want to provide an epistemological alternative. Historically, epistemology, or, to be more precise, the problems of epistemology, have represented impediments to ethics. The same problems of knowledge that make philosophy a sustainable activity have left us unsure about how to construct a system of right and wrong. Solutions have tended to install a God to substitute for the lack of human knowledge, or, as in the case of some ontologically driven ethics like Sartre's (Ibid., 22), find that the absence of God leaves us to accept that "everything is permissible."

I will argue for an alternative epistemological basis that will contribute to a framework of ethics. Specifically, the problem of knowledge will be regarded as the basis on which the ethical framework can begin to emerge. The problem of knowledge might rightly be thought of as the source of the solution. This essay is, therefore, guided by a simple, if unusual, question: how do we know that I am not God? The question refers to 'we' because, in addition to you (plural), I could also be mistaken about what I am. Errors in introspection are not uncommon. Therefore, 'we' may all be mistaken about what I am (and I in this case refers to me, the author of this essay). I want to suggest up front that this question is more conse-

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cepts." Thus, the nature of being does not mandate that one treat his or her neighbors with kindness.

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quential than an analogous question such as, "how do we know that I am not a zombie or an extra-terrestrial?" Gods are traditionally situated as authorities in ethical discourses. Our interaction with gods, therefore, will have consequences for considerations of ethics. As we trace the problems of knowledge through epistemological discourse, through idealist and materialist systems, the answer that confronts us, that we cannot know for certain that I am not God, demands a specific, rational response. Moreover, as we universalize the guiding question and its response to any and every human being, the prudential consequence is that we treat each human being as though he or she *might be God.* In the following section, I offer an exposition of the extent to which uncertainty has saddled ethics in two of the largest philosophical traditions, idealism and materialism. Next, I address the operative question, how do we know that I am not God, from a deeply skeptical posture. Finally, using a reversal of Blaise Pascal's famous wager on faith, I argue that skepticism demands an ethical response to uncertainty. If we cannot know for certain that any or all individuals we encounter are not God, then it becomes prudent to act as though they might be God. Therefore, I am arguing for an ethics predicated on the condition of epistemic uncertainty.

II. A Brief Tour of the Uncertain in Idealism and Materialism

In both idealist and materialist philosophical systems, ethics are confounded by the problems of knowledge. In the history of political thought, we find evidence of this in ancient idealists such as Plato and modern materialists such as Thomas Hobbes. Plato, as an idealist, and Hobbes, as a materialist, represent disparate philosophical systems that, despite their metaphysical oppositions, highlight the ethical problem posed by epistemology. Theories of knowledge have often been an obstacle to frameworks of ethics within the annals of political thought. Philosophy stands as a testament to the problem of knowledge. Translated from ancient Greek, the term philosophy means "love of wisdom." In his *Symposium*, Plato relays to us the idea that to love something is necessarily to lack; to love something means to not have it. As Socrates tells the poet Agathon:

So this and every other case of desire is desire for what isn't available and actually there. Desire and love are directed at what you don't have, what isn't there, and what you need (Plato 1999, 34-35).

If we follow this train of reasoning, consistent as it seems with the character of Socrates presented throughout the Platonic dialogues, philosophy is the adoration of wisdom, something that it needs but does not yet have. Philosophy is situated, perhaps, in that state "between wisdom and ignorance" which Diotima of Mantinea tells Socrates is "having right opinions without being able to give reasons for having them" (Ibid., 37). This, she says, does not qualify as knowing because knowing requires that "you can give reasons" (Ibid., 37).

The criteria for knowledge, as distinguished from opinion or belief, have long been elusive. Genuine knowledge, in the strong sense, is something that Socrates dedicatedly pursues, despite being a man who claims that he knows nothing except that he may be just a little wiser than those who are unaware of their own ignorance. On this journey he encounters individuals who, it turns out, are overly confident in their claims to knowledge. Perhaps the most notable of these figures is Euthyphro. On his way to answer a court summons, Socrates encounters Euthyphro who is also going to court in order to prosecute his own father for murder. That Euthyphro would prosecute his own father signals to Socrates that here is a man who is confident with regards to knowledge. Indeed, he asks Euthyphro if there is any doubt in the rightness of his actions, to which Euthyphro replies, "No, there would be no benefit for me, Socrates, nor would Euthyphro be any different from the many human beings, if I didn't know all such things precisely" (Plato 1998, 45). Socrates interrogates him on the meaning of piety, since it is supposedly a knowledge of what is pious to which Euthyphro attributes his actions. It turns out that Euthyphro's knowledge rests on the claim that piety is that which the gods love. Socrates asks his perplexed interlocutor, "Is the pious loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is loved" (Ibid., 52)? The façade of Euthyphro's claim to knowledge begins to disintegrate rapidly.

As Alexander Nehamas (1998, 38) points out, Euthyphro is a character, and as such, his apparent and appalling "stu-

pidity" is intended by Plato. Euthyphro is deliberately made to appear dumb in order to emphasize the bankruptcy of knowledge upon which he bases his actions. It is the author of the dialogue who is attempting to teach us something about the relationship between ethical action and knowledge. "Euthyphro," then, stands as the paragon of early concerns for knowledge. Although many, if not most, of the early Socratic dialogues were concerned with the inability to generate firm knowledge, Euthyphro represents a nexus between epistemological bankruptcy and ethical or unethical behavior. His untroubled desire to prosecute his father on the basis of flawed knowledge is not meant to be isolated as a lesson about prosecuting fathers. "Euthyphro" teaches us about how what we think is right action based on our knowledge is always called into question because we know so little. That which seems clearly right based on the knowledge of piety, prosecuting a father, is rendered nebulous to all but Euthyphro when the foundation of knowledge gives way. Now, if right action is informed by knowledge of virtue—virtues such as courage, moderation, piety, and wisdom—and that knowledge is incomplete or incorrect, then the possibility of firmly ascertaining right action remains elusive.

We might argue that Plato believed knowledge, in the strong sense of the term, was possible, though not by all. It also seems that, for Plato, while knowledge was possible, it was only possible through the experience of the right soul, and was not transmissible.[2] Now, for Thomas Hobbes, the problem of knowledge also is that it cannot be transmitted. For Hobbes, the universe is composed of matter. Sensibility is a function of contact with matter, or, as Hobbes (1991, 14) says, "by the pressure, that is, by the motion, of externall things upon our Eyes, Eares, and other organs thereunto ordained." Insofar as we are in contact with matter, we can sense it, but since all matter is

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[2] See, for example, the Allegory of the Cave in *The Republic of Plato.* Socrates and his interlocutors dismiss the idea that the philosophic soul can be dragged or chaperoned out of the cave. It is a journey that the soul takes alone, slowly, and experientially rather than didactically. The Seventh Epistle, which I view as authentic, also seems to confirm the position that a straightforward teaching of knowledge is burdened by the ambiguities of language. Even if knowledge is possible, in Plato's view, it remains inaccessible to the vast majority of human beings.

in motion, we do not have immediate sense; all that remains is imagination, which Hobbes (Ibid., 14) tells us is "decaying sense." Our ability to establish empirical knowledge is greatly diminished by this metaphysical problem. Human beings are left with only the spectral impression of knowledge that accompanies decaying sense. Empirical knowledge is a fading memory.

Hobbes's materialist epistemology is not restricted to metaphysical concerns. Theological knowledge is also called into question. The human mind, Hobbes (Ibid., 23) tells us, is finite. Thusly, it can only accommodate finite ideas. God, as something infinite, cannot be grasped by the mind (Ibid., 23). While still arguing within the Christian framework that assumes the infinite nature of divinity, Hobbes explains that we cannot know the will of God. If God is infinite, God's will cannot be grasped by the finite human mind. Consequently, knowledge that is purportedly related to God effaces its true, human origins. As Hobbes says:

> If Livy say the Gods made once a Cow speak, and we believe it not; wee distrust not God therein, but Livy. So that it is evident, that whatsoever we believe, upon no other reason, then what is drawn from authority of men onely, and their writings; whether they be sent from God or not, is Faith in men onely (Ibid., 49).

The word of God is, in truth, the word from man. Of course, for Hobbes, the consequence of the problem of knowledge is stark. Since matter is in motion and all we can know is decaying sense, we are left in a world of uncertainty wherein we cannot know the minds of other men. The only apparent truth left to us is that other human beings desire to continue in motion, and thus continue living. So, lacking insight into the minds of others, and without any knowledge of God's will, there is no ethical mandate beyond the unrestricted pursuit of self-preservation. Hobbes's solution is the construction of a Leviathan, a "mortall God" who can provide certainty and the secure grounds for right behavior.

The concerns represented by Plato and Hobbes indicated that for both idealist and materialist epistemologies the acquisition of knowledge, particularly as it might be deployed for ethical action, is elusive. Knowledge, distinguished in Plato's epistemology from belief or opinion, is unerring. Likewise for

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Hobbes, knowledge is identical with truth, the embodiment of certainty. Reaching the threshold of what constitutes authentic knowledge is severely challenging. Consequently, Plato understood that his philosopher kings would have only fading knowledge of the good as they assumed the mantle of political leadership. Hobbes, likewise, recognized that his sovereign would have to be invested with total authority and simply impose by decree what constituted knowledge.

Plato and Hobbes are but two philosophers to confront the problem epistemology poses for ethics. They do, however, represent disparate metaphysical and epistemological frameworks that ultimately arrive at the same frustration. Evidence of the same conundrum, that we can never quite know what ethical action looks like, can be found in the thought of Aristotle, whose virtuous mean is balanced between extremes of dearth and excess that can never be delineated precisely or in totality; it appears in Descartes who doubts even his own formulation that thinking proves existence; and the utilitarian precept of Bentham and Mill, that we ought to strive for the most good for the most people, is complicated by our highly ambiguous knowledge of the good.

A common contemporary approach to epistemology, albeit one that finds its origins with Plato, identifies knowledge as justified, true belief. The essence of this epistemological proposition is that knowledge exists when a belief is true and is justifiable. As Graham Dawson (1981, 315) notes, "if we have justified true belief, then we necessarily have knowledge." So, if proposition 'x' is believed by at least one entity capable of belief, and if that belief is true, and if the believer is justified in holding that belief, the necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge have been met.

Doubt, however, persists for a number of reasons. The elements involved in the formula of knowledge represent fields of investigation that are themselves called into question. Accordingly, the argument over whether or not 'justified, true belief' constitutes authentic knowledge has been contentious. What does it mean to be justified or justifiable?[3] Edmund L. Gettier

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[3] The question of justifiability seems necessarily to point to the questions about the nature of justice, questions which are not answered to any resolution.

(1963, 121) vigorously disputes the validity of justified, true belief as knowledge, saying, "it is possible for a person to be justified in believing a proposition that is in fact false." When is an individual or group justified in its belief? Truth is perhaps the most extensive minefield in philosophy. In general terms, truth pertains to the consistency between a proposition or idea, and reality. Yet, as Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985, 108) remind us, directly accessing reality is unlikely, given that "every object is constituted as an object of discourse." Even the concept of belief is contestable. How firmly must one believe something for it to be knowledge, even after it is justified and true? If I half-heartedly believe notion x, and it turns out to be justified and true, is it still only partially knowledge?

Without attempting to resolve these problems, I take the position that justified, true belief is a persuasive definition of knowledge. I adhere to this view because definitions of knowledge that rely on less stringent standards appear to conflate knowledge with other kinds of understanding such as belief, opinion, and faith. However, meeting the conditions of justified, true belief remains persistently elusive, and, therefore, I adopt a skeptical posture toward the possibility of actually achieving this high standard of knowledge. The difficulty present is analogous to recognizing other persuasive concepts. One may find, for example, that the central definition of justice provided in *The Republic of Plato*—that every individual could do what nature has best fitted his or her soul to do—is compelling. Even so, accepting a definition of justice is different from actually obtaining a just society. Accordingly, even if the definition of knowledge as justified, true belief is valid and constitutes the necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge, it is not tantamount to actually possessing any genuine knowledge. Admitting that the definition is persuasive does not equate to actually having knowledge itself, since even the definition of knowledge is merely persuasive and not absolute. Keith Lehrer (1993, 228) articulates the skeptical stance, writing, "Rather, the contention is that no one knows anything, not even that no one knows anything." The problem of knowledge is that even if definitions of knowledge are conventionally agreed upon, or enforced by a Hobbesian sov-

ereign acting as author of definitions, the standards of genuine knowledge appear unattainable. The conditions for meeting justified, true belief and demonstrating that those conditions have been met are exceedingly difficult. Even if we understand truth as an indicator of consistency between a proposition and reality, recognizing and demonstrating that consistency is most difficult.

Diametrically opposed epistemologies have been led to concur that the possibility for ethical action derived through knowledge is subverted by the instability of knowledge. Whether we call the latter the Forms, the pronouncements of a mortal God, or justified, true belief, it is tantalizingly elusive. There is very little that we can claim truly to know. This would seem to be a problem for founding an ethics based on epistemology, but I want to suggest that our lack of knowledge, our tremendous ignorance, might turn out to be ethically useful.

III. A Thing Deserving of Awe

In accordance with the problem of knowledge, I pose a question rooted in deep skeptical doubt: how do we know that I am not God? Of course, to ask this question and arrive at any kind of response, we must first delineate at least some of the terms within the query. What is meant by God? For the purposes of this essay, I attribute only two characteristics to God. A God is an entity that is omnipotent, whatever that means; and God is a thing that deserves to be regarded with awe by things that are not God. By God I mean that entity or entities which ought to be held in awe. I leave it to the reader to decide if the basis of that awe is fear or love; I simply say that it is an entity that deserves our awe. Of course this definition is not by any means universal or exhaustive, but by offering a particular and incomplete articulation of God that definition becomes more able to accommodate other visions of God. The less I say about what God is, the more versions of God are compatible with the template provided here.

Secondly, the reader may rightly wonder why I, specifically, am the object in question, why I and not something else might or might not be God. The question at hand excludes, at least for the moment, the possibility of considering that other individuals or objects may or may not be God. While the question

God an entity that ought to be held in awe.

I propose would seem to be grossly narcissistic, it is simply derived from the utility of being a convenient starting place. Other entities will also be considered in due course. For the moment, 'I' refers specifically to me, the author of this essay, and not a Cartesian abstraction, although I may be compatible, for the purposes of this essay, with the concept of a generally rational, atomistic individual.[4]

To return to the question, how do we know that I am not God? In order to respond to the question, we might address the operational characteristics of God: omnipotence and deserving of awe. Firstly, can we know that I am not omnipotent? Since omnipotence means all-powerful, one of the potential powers that an omnipotent being would have includes the ability to appear less-than-omnipotent. My apparent frailty, the fact that I seem to age and suffer occasional infirmities, and even the logical flaws plaguing this essay, could merely be projections of my unlimited power. Whatever I do or appear to do might merely be a function of my caprice. If I were, for instance, to be hit by a bus and end up in the hospital or even appear to die, this is not a true sign of my frailty or mortality. As God, I may be imitating those qualities.

Secondly, can we know that I am not deserving of awe from things that are not God-like? In truth, I may deserve the awe of non-Gods even if I do not receive their awe. That I might not receive their awe may be a sign of error on the part of non-Gods. Entities that are limited in power, unlike omnipotent entities, are capable of genuine error. So, the fact that I might not receive their awe may simply be their fault as non-Gods, and does not indicate that I am undeserving, even if I am, in fact, undeserving. However, the fact that I do not receive awe from certain entities may also indicate that those entities are Gods themselves. They may not be awed by me because they deserve awe from other non-Gods, but do not owe any awe to other Gods. The presence of other Gods, however, does not negate the possibility that I may be God; it simply means that there may be erroneous mortals and other awe-inspiring Gods.

That I appear not to be omnipotent or that I do not inspire

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[4] There are various postmodern disputations of a coherent 'I.' The atomistic 'I' is presented here purely to render the argument manageable.

awe in others does not assure us that I am not God. All of these outward appearances may simply be functions of my omnipotence. They may also represent misunderstandings by mortal observers. The psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1993, 163) argued, "misunderstanding is the very basis of interhuman discourse." Therefore, while God is understood to be capable of dissembling, dissimulation, and simulation, the fundamental basis of human knowledge is miscommunication, misrecognition, and error.

So, how do we know that I am not God? My answer, quite simply, is that there is no way we can know for sure that I am not God. There is simply no way conclusively to establish, to prove with any finality or certainty, that I am not God. Even if I admit to you now that I am not God, this admission does not suffice as justified, true belief, as knowledge. Indeed, it is no more valid an assertion than if I were to "admit" that I am, in fact, God.[5] We may, with very good reason, presume that I am not God, but then it would be, by definition, no better than presumption. Importantly, concluding that we cannot know that I am not God, despite our best beliefs to the contrary, does not mean that I *am* God. It simply means there is no way to know that I *am not*.

Now, as was indicated earlier, this skeptical gesture is merely the first step, albeit of a larger skeptical gesture. We cannot know conclusively that I am not God. For the very same reasons, however, we are similarly unable to conclude that *you* are not God. Even your disavowal of godliness, verbally or demonstrably, would not be conclusive. There is no way to prove that you are not omnipotent or deserving of awe. If I do not regard you with awe, it may be because I have erred as a flawed human being, or because I am also God. In other words, skepticism demonstrates that we cannot know for certain that anyone or anything is not, in fact, God. For the purposes of this essay, however, I will deliberately restrict the discussion of what can be God to humanoids. I say humanoids, and not human beings, because, due to the problem of knowledge, I can only refer to things that appear to be human, but these human-appearing things cannot be disproved as God.[6]

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[5] Except in that instance I would be making a positive assertion of knowledge, rather than advancing a proposition of doubt.

[6] I realize that this excludes animals and other kinds of life, as well as

IV. Reversing the Wager in a World Overrun by Gods

Deep skeptical doubt has historically been a burden for ethics. Epistemology and ethics have tended toward a strained and awkward relationship. In this sense, this essay offers no innovation; I do not propose a positive system of ethical precepts. Instead, this essay tends toward a possibility for ethics derived from uncertainty, the possibility for an ethics of doubt. Immediately, I want to suggest a distinction between an ethics of uncertainty and something like the Golden Rule, that people ought to do unto others as they would have done unto themselves. The distinction lies in that ethics, such as the Golden Rule, presuppose knowledge; in this case, it presupposes that an individual actually knows what he or she would prefer to have done unto himself or herself. Put simply, individuals do not always know what they want, even in reference to what they want done to them. Instead, an ethics of uncertainty supposes no knowledge whatsoever; it only presupposes skeptical doubt.

My assertion that we cannot prove that I am not God may seem to be the height of arrogance and impiety, but, as it turns out, there is a potential benefit in all of this. In terms of ethical possibilities, what does it mean that we cannot conclusively prove that I, you, or anyone else for that matter, is not God? I propose that it means, given a conventional understanding of God as omnipotent and deserving of awe by non-Gods, we ought to act as though each one of us *might be God.* Thus, the person in the street who we might ordinarily find deserving of our indifference, or even contempt, cannot be ruled out as God.[7]

Of course this does not mean that we presume every stranger or acquaintance *is* God. It does not mean we ought to

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inanimate objects, and even the environment. This is simply for the sake of managing the argument at hand, and, at some point, it may be warranted to broaden the argument in order to include those other things within the ethical possibilities I propose.

[7] I also want to distinguish this sort of ethics from those proposed by Emmanuel Levinas, who argues that the face of the other bears the trace of God and that this ultimately compels ethical responsibility (Alford 2004, 147). Levinas, therefore, proceeds from a form of positive knowledge that is theologically informed. Insofar as this essay is informed by skepticism, it does not do either of those things.

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worship each and every person we encounter. An ethics of uncertainty is neither a religion nor a form of atheism. It presupposes no positive conduct beyond the prescription that follows from our inability to know with certainty that any of us is not God. If it is possible that any or all persons we encounter are God, it is imperative to treat those people, not as though they *are* God, but as though they *could be.* It does mean that because we cannot know for sure that the other humanoids we encounter are not God we ought to treat them as though they *might* be omnipotent and deserving of awe.

In terms of rational self-interest, "Pascal's Wager" is instructive. Named for the seventeenth-century French thinker Blaise Pascal, the wager suggests that, even if we cannot provide rational proof for the existence of God, we ought to act as though there is one. Put simply, we are compelled by the fact that we are alive to make a wager. We bet for or against the existence of God, but a bet against the existence of God is an act of folly. As Pascal argues:

> Let us weigh up the gain and the loss involved in calling heads that God exists. Let us assess the two cases: if you win you win everything, if you lose you lose nothing. Do not hesitate then; wager that he does exist" (Pascal 1995, 123).

If one bets that God exists, and it turns out to be true, then there is a payoff that happens to be an infinite reward in the form of everlasting happiness (+1). If one bets that God exists, and it turns out to be false, there is neither gain nor loss, just as if one bets God does not exist and that turns out to be true (+/-0). Interestingly, Pascal does not presuppose a loss beyond the failure to gain infinite happiness. Even if one bets that God does not exist and that turns out to be false, there is no loss. So, it is possible to bet against God, and if it turns out that there is a God, then the bettor draws even. The best course of action, the one that yields the greatest possibility of gain, is to bet that God exists.

	Wager	
	God Exists	God Does Not Exist
True	+1	+/-0
False	+/-0	+/-0

Fig. One: Pascal's Wager

In "Pascal's Wager" there is nothing to lose, and only gains to be had. This is why only a fool would wager against God. In the ethics proposed in this essay, however, there is nothing to gain, and only losses. There is no everlasting happiness if one turns out to be right. There is no gain if it is true that God does not exist, but if one bets against God, and it turns out that God exists, there would literally be hell to pay.

	Wager	
	I Am God	I Am Not God
True	+/-0	+/-0
False	+/-0	-1

Fig. Two: A Modified Version of the Wager

The status quo is maintained in three situations. If you wager that I am God, and it turns out to be true, you receive no gain (I am stingy). If you wager that I am God, and it turns out to be false, nothing has really been lost, except perhaps your faith in me. If you wager that I am not God and this turns out to be true, then nothing has changed. However, if you should wager that I am not God, and this turns out to be false, you stand to lose, and lose badly. The conditions of this wager are stark. In gambling terms, the consequences of losing the wager are potentially so steep that we must assume the other player has been dealt a better hand. Problems of knowledge effectively mean that we are always gambling from a weaker hand.

Uncertainty demands an ethical response. What does this possibility of ethics entail? How does one treat an omnipotent entity that deserves to be regarded with awe? The most general response might be 'prudently' or 'cautiously'.[8] If we consider more specific contexts, such as thievery, or lying, we might be compelled to ask questions such as, "Is it advisable to steal from or lie to someone who *might* be God?" The answer is likely to be in the negative.

It may be argued that the justification for this prescription is an implicit fear of dire consequences. Lurking behind all of

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[8] This mixture of prudence and caution may ultimately resemble Aristotle's (1998, 39) vision of virtuous prudence, which is derived from "a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean, i.e. the mean relative to us." The compatibility of Aristotelian ethics with the proposals of this essay may be grounds for further exploration.

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this is a latent notion of an angry God's wrath, which is unleashed if due reverence and awe are not afforded by an insufficiently wary individual. Toward this potential criticism, this essay will offer no defense aside from pointing out that the history of political thought is laden with the tragic consequences of epistemological hubris. False certainty is the propellant of tragedy. Sophocles tells us that false knowledge is the great destroyer of human beings:

Epistemological hubris has tragic consequences.

> Hope springs high, and to many a man hope brings comfort and consolation; yet she is to some nothing but fond illusion: swiftly they come to ruin, as when a man treads unawares on hot fire. For it was a wise man first made that ancient saying: to the man whom God will ruin one day shall evil seem good, in his twisted judgment he comes in a short time to fell disaster (Sophocles 1998, 23).

Uncertainty ought to remind us to keep our acts in accordance with the possibility that false knowledge casts a deceptively pleasant façade over destructive consequences. If there is a latent threat in the notion that we ought to treat each person as though he or she might be God, it is because perilous consequences are ubiquitous. That we treat each humanoid with greater prudence and caution suggests only that our ethics ought to conform to the problem of persistent uncertainty.

Now, accompanying any acknowledgment that the other person might be God is the obligation also to recognize that the other person might not be God. The question then becomes, should we also treat each person we encounter as though they might not be God, and thus might not be omnipotent and deserving of awe? The answer is yes. The contrapositive in this case may be just as valid as the initial proposition. We ought to treat all persons as though they might be God at the same time as we treat all persons as though they might not be God. We must treat each person with uncertainty. However, the consequences, in this case, are greatly skewed toward the initial proposition. The consequences for failing to act ethically to some humanoid that does turn out to be God are far worse than if one acts ethically toward someone who is not God, or unethically toward someone who is not God. The consequences of angering a God are much worse than not angering a not-God. Even if I am someone who actually deserves to be treated poorly, the possibility remains that I might be God, and

it is still more epistemologically consistent, and prudent, to treat me as though I might be God. The possibility that I might be God outweighs the possibility that I might deserve to be treated poorly.

What if we were to alter the question significantly by asking, "how do we know that I am not the devil?" Unlike the vague notion of God supplied in this essay, even the most opaque concept of a devil is more definite insofar as a devil is, by definition, a super-powerful and necessarily malevolent entity. Given the characteristic of malevolence, nothing has changed in terms of the wager. The possibility that I might be a devil has no bearing on the nature of your response precisely because a thoroughly malevolent entity will act viciously regardless of any care or prudence you exhibit. If I am a devil, my malfeasance and wickedness will be exerted independently of your interactions with me. Whether or not you display the awe to which I feel entitled, or act prudently and cautiously, I will necessarily behave in accordance with evil. No matter how you attenuate your response to a devil, you can always expect evil from an entity that is essentially evil. In other words, you have nothing to gain or lose if I could be a devil. Nevertheless, since the prospect that I might be God is concurrently possible, it is still advisable to act with prudence and caution.

Likewise, we might ask, how do we know that I am not a prophet, or an emissary of God? Again, this cannot be disproved with any certainty, but that only means one ought to employ prudence and caution, acknowledging the possibility that the proposition *might* be true. Importantly, no authority is derived from this skeptical doubt. The fact that I cannot disprove someone is an emissary of God does not mean that entity has a right to be obeyed. History is saturated with examples of tyrants who claimed to be Gods or prophets leading others into bloody crusades. In this skeptical view, the individual has to consider the possibility that the tyrant could be a God or that a prophet extolling the virtues of holy war might truly be an emissary of the divine. But the equal possibility that they are not Gods or emissaries also remains, especially considering that the means through which tyrants allege their divinity and prophets purport their special knowledge are

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highly dubious. Doubt only behooves the individual to treat others with care, not submissiveness.

One of the attractive features of religious doctrines is that they tend to be framed in such a way that almost any person can understand them. If you act poorly, they explain, you will suffer definite consequences. Contradistinctively, ontological bases for ethics tend to be written in a linguistic argot that few laypersons can comprehend. A considerable investment of time and training is needed to decipher Sartre's prose, for example. With an ethics of uncertainty, we can retain an imperative that any person can comprehend, but without the epistemologically troubled religious tenets. We replace *there will be* consequences with *there might be* consequences. Certainty is traded in for epistemic validity, but, admittedly, the specter of force and the logic of consequences do ultimately remain.

V. Concluding Remarks: Politics of the Indeterminate

In this essay I have argued for a skeptical basis that can serve a possible ethical framework. I have argued that the problem of knowledge—which entails that we possess no real knowledge based on the standard epistemological definition of justified, true belief—can be thought of as a means to ethics, rather than an insurmountable impediment. Our lack of knowledge can be a starting point for ethics. I have argued here for an ethics based on uncertainty, on the negation of knowledge. Not, that is, on a knowledge that "x" proposition is untrue, but on a recognition that we do not know and, because we are immersed in uncertainty, we might consider shaping our behavior in accordance with this insufficient condition. This essay has only broached the possibility for an ethical framework. It does not purport to address all contingencies.

Proposing an ethics of uncertainty is different from an ethics of skepticism, even though it is informed by skepticism. An ethics of skepticism presumes that, because we cannot know anything with certainty, we cannot know anything related to morality. While I agree with the epistemological tenets of this argument, I suggest that our lack of knowledge compels us toward acting ethically even if we do not know what it means to be ethical. Again, the consequences are steep for not acting ethically.

Lack of knowledge compels prudence and caution.

Because we cannot know if I, you, or anyone else is God, and if we understand God as omnipotent, then we are prudent in acting as though each person we encounter might be God. We are prudent in so acting because we have no way of knowing that God is not omnipotent and deserving of awe. Indeed, we have established by convention that a God is something that is omnipotent and deserving of awe. Therefore, the consequence of not treating each person as though he or she might be God could be far greater than treating a person with great care who does not deserve it. In the end, this ethics of uncertainty compels the individual to consider more than the possibilities of getting caught. Anyone who considers stealing, for instance, must consider the possibility, 'what if I get caught?' But that is a purely rational calculation, and not an ethical consideration. Instead, I want to suggest that our lack of knowledge compels us to be uncertain about whether the other we encounter deserves ethical treatment, and that it is precisely our lack of knowledge that compels us to err on the side of prudence and caution.

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