

# On the Prudence of Adopting a ‘Sin Now; Repent Later’ Policy

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## Abstract.

“Listen, I’m against sin. I’ll kick it as long as I’ve got a foot; I’ll punch it as long as I’ve got a fist; I’ll butt it as long as I’ve got a head; and I’ll bite it as long as I’ve got a tooth.” (Billy Sunday) Billy Sunday was a revivalist preacher in the early half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I take it that Billy’s approach to sin will be taken by most to be more theologically acceptable than the following. “I figure I’ll go for the life of sin, followed by the presto-change-o deathbed repentance.” (Bart Simpson) Bart Simpson is a character in the animated TV Show, *The Simpsons*. In the vignette from which this quotation of Bart’s is abstracted, Bart is actually in conversation with a Billy-Sunday-like preacher. The preacher, on hearing of Bart’s theology (Bartian theology, we may call it; not, *n.b.* Barthian theology), replies in a slightly stunned way, as if he had never himself considered Bartianism prior to that particular moment, “Wow! That is a good angle...”. However, he quickly collects himself and adds definitively, “But it’s *not God’s* angle”. In this paper, I wish to explore Bart’s angle; could it, or something like it, after all, be a *prudent* angle?

## Paper.

The question to which this paper addresses itself may seem to some misguided, focusing as it does on the notion of prudential rationality where this is understood as a matter of doing what one reasonably supposes is in one’s self-interest.<sup>1</sup> One of the referees who kindly commented on the paper for this journal was of the opinion that the view that ‘personal cost-benefit considerations of the sort prudence might otherwise suggest should not tip the scale when it comes to religious/moral dilemmas’ would be axiomatic to all religious believers as such; in my terms, this referee’s opinion was that to be a religious believer is in part to adopt Billy’s approach. Thus the question to which this paper addresses itself cannot be relevant to any religious believers. I disagree. The topic of this paper parallels the topic of Amoralism as it has long been discussed in secular moral philosophy: absent religious assumptions, is it prudentially rational to be an amoralist?<sup>2</sup> A disputant in this secular moral-philosophical debate (or rather someone who absents themselves quickly from it) has been the sort of moralist who is of the opinion that it’s clearly not *morally* rational to be an amoralist and, as moral rationality has trumping value over prudential, so whether or not it is prudentially rational to be so is an irrelevance as we decide how we have most reason to live. But (a) this trumping view of moral reasons is not held by all who count themselves as moralists (and nor is the parallel trumping view of religious/moral reasons held by all who count themselves theists<sup>3</sup>) and (b) even if we assume it is the correct view to hold, the question of whether

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<sup>1</sup> No particular understanding of self-interest is supposed in what follows; I draw attention to the fact that hedonism, for example, is not supposed.

<sup>2</sup> For a typical discussion, see e.g. P. Singer, ‘Why act morally?’, *Practical Ethics*, chapter 10, CUP: 1979.

<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, another reader of this paper who is himself a traditional theist was of the opinion that if prudential reasons sometimes deviated from moral reasons in what they prescribed, then it would be all-things-considered most rational for a person to follow prudential reasons in such situation of clash: “If it’s not ultimately in an individual’s

we can be reasonably confident that prudential reasons align with moral reasons may still be of interest. It is true that, on this assumption, it cannot be of *practical* interest in that the answer to it cannot on this assumption affect how we have most reason to behave. But even on this assumption it may be of theological/moral interest: do the prudential and moral reasons we ordinarily take ourselves to have for and against actions ultimately point in the same direction or in different ones? On certain *religious* suppositions, it can look as if they point in opposite directions; rather than underwriting the moral project with a system of rewards and punishments, a forgiving God can seem to undercut it in that adopting a policy of sinfulness now, with planned repentance later, can seem prudentially justifiable.

In this paper, therefore, I wish to draw out these suppositions and ‘lightly’ defend them. I say ‘lightly’ as I am not convinced that on balance one has more reason to accept than reject many of them, let alone all of them. But I am convinced that there is at least some reason to accept each of them and that exploring how one might prudentially justifiably go about life were one to accept these suppositions has implications relevant to the lives of those of us who do not accept all of them but do accept some of them and do accept some things which are very close to those which we reject; and this is the position that many of us who are traditional theists will find ourselves in.

It’ll be most useful, I think, to call these suppositions ‘premises’ and to think of them as they might be used as building blocks for an argument for the rationality of following a Bartian injunction which we might express – supplementing the wisdom of Bart Simpson with some of the phrasing of Martin Luther – as “Be a sinner and sin boldly, but, more latterly, repent.”<sup>4</sup> To be more precise, Bartianism, as I shall be understanding it, is the thesis that it is in one’s best interests to follow the two-stage plan of (1) looking to sin whenever doing so would produce greater net *ante-mortem* benefit than not doing so and (2) repenting of sins on one’s deathbed so as to avoid what would otherwise be the due punishment for them, perhaps superadding to the repentance due for one’s sins *per se* suitable repentance for these sins having been committed in the spirit of ‘gaming the system’ in which they would have been committed. In each pre-deathbed choice then, the view suggests, one is prudentially rational in doing a self-interested cost/benefit/risk analysis and picking the highest-ranked option, *regardless of how sinful it might be*; and then - the second stage of the plan - on one’s deathbed one is rational in repenting of all sins committed prior to then. Bartianism, so understood, is *prima facie* appealing in that it promises us ‘the best of both worlds’, this world and the next. But there also seems to be something paradoxical about it, even from the

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self-interest to be moral, then being moral loses its reason-giving force for that individual.” And this instinct to see things as it were ‘the opposite way round’ from the way they were seen by this referee is surely behind many of the traditional attempts to show that God (and His system of rewards/punishments) underwrites the rationality of the moral project in a way that other things cannot underwrite it and in a way it needs underwriting. See also the view of Mavrodes, as discussed in a later note.

<sup>4</sup> It will be noted that I do not give a definition of sin in this paper, in the hope that I can advance an argument which works on any plausible understanding of it. In the main text, I assume that a necessary condition of something’s being a sin is that it be a morally wrong act and I ignore the view that all of our acts, however morally permissible or even obligatory they might be, are tainted by sin. On such a ‘universal tainting’ view, some distinctions need to be drawn within the all-encompassing category of sinful acts, distinctions which grade sins as more or less serious, presumably by reference to moral considerations; on such a ‘universal tainting’ view then, the argument of the main text could proceed with the choice raising the relevant issues being rendered, not as it is presented in the main text (to sin or not to sin), but as a choice between sinning more or less greatly. I thank one of the referees of this paper for raising this issue.

get-go. How is one actually going to ‘pull off’ stage two of the plan if one has hitherto been acting in the manner of stage one? And what if one dies before one gets even to attempt stage two?

In the scene a quotation from which I gave earlier, after the Preacher has told Bart that Bartianism is not ‘God’s angle’, he then encourages Bart to eschew sin altogether; as, if he does so, then he’s “covered” in the event of sudden death. Bart, assessing what he’s been told as one might an insurance policy, is in turn impressed “Full coverage, eh? Hmmm.” And one must concede that the sudden death issue is an issue for Bartianism, but it is not as such decisive against every Bartian position in every circumstance. It may well be that the probability of one’s death prior to being able to repent is sufficiently low as to mean that the net *ante-mortem* benefit of a particular sin is still worth the risk; it will depend on how big a net benefit the *ante-mortem* sin brings relative to what would be brought by one’s other options and how big the *post-mortem* punishment for this sin would be (should one die prior to repenting of it) as well as how likely one is to die before the necessary repentance has been accomplished. Obviously the harm of the punishment may be greater than the benefit, but in talking of prudential rationality we are talking about maximizing *expected* benefit, so if the potential gains to losses come out in a steep ratio and if the probability is really low that one will die prior to repenting, the risk may still be one it would be prudentially irrational not to take. We make these sorts of decisions every day. Nobody thinks that the ‘But what if you died in the next five minutes?’ question shows it to be the case that one should only perform actions which are such that were one to die in the next five minutes, they would have been objectively the most prudent actions one could have performed. And the same applies here. But obviously as one gets older, *ceteris paribus*, the risk increases; what would be a prudentially rational sin for a 20-year-old whose recent thorough medical has told them they are in perfect health would not be one for a 80-year-old who’s been told that they are likely to be taken off by a heart attack at any moment.<sup>5</sup>

Let us see then what can be said for Bartianism.

Premise 1.

*There are some sinful actions - possible for at least some of us on at least some occasions - which are such that they would produce greater net ante-mortem benefit for us than would any non-sinful actions available to us on those occasions.*

I want to start by drawing attention to the fact that premise 1 makes a very minimal claim. Premise 1 might be true and yet it also be true that most of the sinful actions which we may perform would not produce as great net *ante-mortem* benefit as would a goodly number of the alternative non-sinful actions open to us at the relevant moments of choice. Premise 1 might be true yet it also be true that the vast majority of sinful actions we might ever perform are net *ante-mortem* harmful to us. And premise 1 might be true and yet it also be true that sinful actions are always in themselves ones which, due to their sinful aspect, harm the perpetrator, even if premise 1’s being true would of course entail that that harmful aspect is not in all cases one that outweighs any beneficial aspect. Given philosophers’ understanding of ‘some’, as meaning ‘at least one’, we should also read

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<sup>5</sup> I am here arguably ignoring a Pascal’s-Wager-type argument to the effect that if the result of one’s dying unrepentant would be infinitely bad, then running any chance (however small) of dying unrepentant is irrational. We’ll return to these issues later.

premise 1, despite its use of plural terms such as ‘occasions’, as being such that it is sufficient for it to be true that a single person at one stage in the history of the universe had, has or will have available to them a single sinful act which, were they to perform it, would bring them greater net *ante-mortem* benefit than would any non-sinful act available to them at that moment. So, if there is even a single example of this phenomenon affecting someone somewhere in the universe at some time, premise 1 is true. And in fact – let me chance my hand here – it is plausible that the phenomenon is widespread; its being so would go a long way to explaining the breadth and depth of humanity’s sinfulness. Why would there be so much sin about if it were not the case that sinning was often beneficial (at least *ante-mortem*) for the sinner?<sup>6</sup>

Morality quite often demands of one that one does something not for one’s individual benefit, but for the benefit of others, and, when it does so, there is often an alternative action to that which morality demands of one, an alternative that would be more to one’s individual benefit (*ante-mortem* at least) than would the action which morality demands. One often has duties to others which morality instructs one to fulfil, but often in fulfilling such duties one would be failing to avail oneself of some benefit that one might otherwise have brought to oneself (and doing so with no compensating benefit coming to one through dutiful action, at least *ante-mortem*). One is often in a situation where the virtuous person would clearly behave in a particular way and yet one can see that that way of behaving would not actually bring to the virtuous person as much benefit as he or she might otherwise have obtained, at least *ante-mortem*; thus, as one decides what to do in such a situation, one will know what it would be virtuous for one to do; one will know what it is which would bring one most benefit, at least *ante-mortem*; and one will know that they are not the same thing. In the last three sentences, I have cast what is fundamentally the same point in consequentialist, deontological and virtue theoretic terms so as to reveal – I hope – its plausibility to the reader, regardless of which of the main three branches of normative theory he or she finds most plausible.<sup>7</sup> Now let me go on to give a putative example of a situation which shows premise 1 to be true.

Doug is at the last stage of getting some building work done on his house and he is worried that the final bill, when it comes from his builder, Bob, will push him significantly over budget. He is apprised by Bob of what the total amount of this final bill will be and his worst fears are confirmed: Doug instantly realises that paying that amount would push various aspects of his precarious finances past their tipping points, forcing Doug and his family to make deep and broad cuts to their quality of life for years to come; the costs would not be ruinous, but they would be close to it. Doug asks Bob if there’s anything that can be done to bring the bill down – even ten percent or so would do it. Bob replies, with a wink, “Bob the builder; can he fix it? Bob the builder; yes he can!” Bob explains that if Doug were to give him a sufficient amount cash-in-hand (“call it a ‘gift’”),

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<sup>6</sup> It’s been pointed out to me by Nick Waghorn and Dave Leal that the mere widespread appearance of its being beneficial in this way would be sufficient to explain the phenomenon and that seems to me right, though the fact that one would then need to develop and defend on independent grounds an error theory of common judgments in this area counts against this move.

<sup>7</sup> Mark Wynn points out to me that were one to maintain a position such as that of George Mavrodes (in his paper, ‘Religion and the queerness of morality’ in William Wainwright & Robert Audi (eds.), *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment: New Essays in the Philosophy of Religion*. Cornell University Press. pp. 213-26 (1986)) to the effect that moral reasons are (in central cases) overriding and that only Theism can make sense of that because only Theism can sensibly postulate an afterlife of rewards and punishments such as to ensure that moral conduct is always in a person’s prudential best interest, then this would support the Bartian project at this point.

then he would be “minded” to bring the final bill down to such a level that the total cost (gift plus bill) to Doug would be less than 90 percent of the amount originally projected. Although Bob doesn’t explain his rationale, it is clear that paying Bob in this fashion would mean that Bob could evade some of his tax responsibilities and that it is this which explains the ‘fix’. Doug quickly realises then that accepting Bob’s offer would mean that none of the tipping points in his financial affairs would be reached; no reductions in quality of life at all would be entailed. Additionally, Doug realises that any guilt he might feel about taking Bob up on his offer (and he would feel some guilt; he is not an amoralist) would be swamped by the feeling of relief that he hadn’t ‘let his family down’; and, as Doug reflects, there’s no way he could ever be convicted of any offence; after all, what cash he offers as a ‘gift’ to Bob the day or so before Bob draws up his final bill is nobody’s business but his own; and what Bob does or doesn’t ultimately declare on his tax return is Bob’s business.

I take it that it is clear that Doug is under a moral obligation to eschew Bob’s offer; receive the bill for the amount as initially projected; pay it; and make the cuts to the quality of life that are thereby entailed. However, I also take it as plausible that it would benefit Doug more (at least *ante-mortem*) were he to take Bob up on his offer, paying Bob the smaller amount that the cash-in-hand and smaller bill would total and thereby not needing to make any cuts to the quality of life that he and his family enjoy.

If so, this is plausibly a case where a sinful action brings to the agent committing it more net *ante-mortem* benefit than would any alternative non-sinful action available to that agent. And, as mentioned earlier, if there’s one case of this phenomenon, premise 1 is true.

Now of course the notion of benefit which pulls this train of thought along in the direction of Bartianism may be contested and if it is simply rejected in the following fashion then the train of thought won’t even depart, let alone reach its final destination. If we replace the notion of benefit on which the example relies (if it is to be taken as an example of the phenomenon in question) with a sufficiently morally-inflected or theologically-inflected notion of benefit, the argument can’t even get up steam. “What has lexical priority when it comes to assessing what it is to someone’s benefit to do is the effect that the doing of that thing would have on the person’s soul; would a given action sully it or would it not?”, one can imagine someone influenced by Socrates (and, terminologically, by Rawls) saying. Such a notion of what’s truly a benefit to a person (as opposed to what they may foolishly take to be a benefit to them) can, I concede, put the kibosh on premise 1. And, to reveal why I am only ‘lightly’ defending this premise, it does seem to me that there is much to be said for the view that benefit *is* morally and theologically inflected. But even if benefit is inflected in one or both of these ways and even if we therefore allow that acting immorally is intrinsically harmful to the person who does so, this type of harm is not obviously the lexical-priority sort of harm it is being taken to be by the person whose opinion I have just put into words; and thus it is an open question whether or not the benefits in non-moral terms that acting immorally may bring to the person who is, for the sake of argument, necessarily harmed in some respect and to some extent by acting immorally may not yet outweigh this harm in some cases. Imagine meeting Doug ten years after the choice in question, which choice, further imagine, he made in favour of taking Bob up on his offer; and imagine hearing Doug reflect on that choice in the following fashion.

“Sure, I sullied my soul that day. That *was* a harmful aspect to the decision. But it didn’t dispose me to more sin later; if anything, it had the opposite effect. Though I didn’t anticipate this benefit at the time, it led me to re-order my finances so that no such future temptation would arise. And now - as I reflect on the happy and untroubled family life that I have thus been able to enjoy over the last ten years - I conclude that whilst what I did that day was morally wrong, it was what *net* benefitted me most (at least *ante-mortem*).” Are we really confident that Doug *must* be wrong in his assessment? Well, I am not.<sup>8</sup>

Premise 1 looks at least somewhat plausible.

Premise 2.

*If an action is one the performing of which brings one more benefit than would any other action available to one, then it is prudentially rational for one to perform that action.*

It seems to me that premise 2 may be taken as being a tautology; that’s just what prudential rationality (in conceptually-possible contrast to moral rationality) means. I can’t think of much more to say about it then, though of course 2 as it stands may be a bit ‘rough and ready’ – perhaps, to be more precise, 2 should tell us that the top-scoring action is ‘maximally’ prudentially rational, but that other actions may be to some degree prudentially rational insofar as they approximate it. Anyway, none of that nuancing makes a difference to any of what follows, so I won’t get into it.

Premise 3.

*If there are not post-mortem harms caused by them sufficient to outweigh their ante-mortem benefits, then some sinful actions are prudentially rational actions.*

3 follows from 1 and 2. 2 is a tautology, so 3 inherits undiminished whatever plausibility 1 has. 1 is, as I put it, ‘at least somewhat plausible’, so 3 is too.

Premise 4.

*If one repents of one’s sins prior to one’s death, then no post-mortem harms will befall one for one’s sins, for God will not punish one for them at all.*

Now, this is not clearly right, for a whole host of reasons. Firstly, and most obviously, it presupposes that God exists; and God’s existence is a topic that has not been without controversy

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<sup>8</sup> With regards to this example: I want it to be an example of something that is (1) clearly morally wrong and yet also (2) something the wilful and knowing doing of which would not saddle someone of normal moral sensitivities with enough *ante-mortem* feelings of guilt to outweigh the benefits that the doing of it brought him or her and nor would it clearly so harm their relationship with God (relative to how it would have stood without it) that if benefit is theologically inflected that renders it imprudent *ante-mortem*. And these two imperatives point in different directions. I’ve tried to balance them as best I can, but at least one person commenting on my paper believed that in the example as given it isn’t clear that Doug does anything wrong if he takes Bob up on his offer. That person at least would have been better served had I outlined a simpler situation, one whereby Doug considered simply failing to pay Bob the full amount of the final bill in the knowledge that Bob would not find it worth his while financially to take Doug to court for the remainder.

in the history of thought. But let's not get into that. Let's help ourselves to a big assumption and suppose that a broadly theistic worldview is right and known to be right with a high degree of rational confidence by the person contemplating the rationality of Bartianism. And let's further suppose that the only way *post-mortem* harms could come to one would be were God to bring them to one by way of punishment; and again that all this is known to be so with a high degree of confidence. (We shall return to this point later, but the punishment that God brings may best be conceived as a form of punishment intrinsic to one's feeling of remorse, when it comes, for the sins in question; it need not be conceived of as extrinsic, Him say acquiescing to his colleague Lucifer administering of a certain number of prods with a pointy pitchfork or some such, though that is more picturesque.) Even on such a worldview, there are alternatives to premise 4, ones that are close enough to have much of the intuitive pull of 4 for theists and their proximity and gravitational attraction, as it were, will thus pull many who are of this general worldview away from 4 and towards these alternatives to it.<sup>9</sup> The point cogent to our project of seeing what may be said in favour of Bartianism is that these alternatives to 4 won't do the job that 4 can do for the argument which I am seeking sympathetically to develop for it.

For example, one could reject premise 4 but accept a supposition 4\* along the lines I'm about to articulate. (I call it a 'supposition' rather than a 'premise' now as I am suggesting then that it would be ill-fitted to be slotted-in instead of 4 if one's intention were to be to keep the argument for Bartianism going.)

#### Supposition 4\*

*If one repents of one's sins prior to one's death, then less post-mortem harm will befall one for one's sins, for God will not punish one for them to as great an extent as He would otherwise punish one for them.*

4\*, if true, would allow that it might well be the case that God could arrange things in the following way. Those who repent, even if only on their deathbed, *do* avoid the eternal punishment of Hell, but they do not avoid the finite punishment of Purgatory, which finite punishment is in itself in all cases sufficient to mean that any sinning which brought net greater *ante-mortem* benefits to the sinner than would have been brought to him or her by any other non-sinful action he or she could have performed on the relevant occasions is overbalanced. Whilst acting in conformity with 4\* then, God ensures that all cases of *ante-mortem* sinning bring sufficiently great punishment harms in Purgatory to mean that creatures would in fact have net-benefitted from refraining from the

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<sup>9</sup> One of the referees for this paper pointed out that on various views repentance as such is not sufficient, even if it is necessary, for one to escape *post-mortem* punishment. So, a mainstream Christian view would have it that one must, in addition to repenting, accept Christ as one's personal saviour. On such a view, the second stage of the Bartian plan would need to be adapted (relative to the way it is put in the main text) to include doing this (call this 'repentance plus'). This, I believe, could be done without fundamentally affecting the structure of the argument. Another point the same referee raised is that the plan assumes that repentance (or 'repentance plus') is an act over which we have at least some control. Some of these issues I return to in the main text, when considering whether or not one may reasonably suppose that one will be likely to choose at stage 2 of the plan to do something which at stage 1 one is not willing to choose to do. The same referee pointed out that there's a possibility that one might support the rationality of Bartianism if one is of the opinion that one can only repent (or 'repent plus') when the Holy Spirit moves one to do so, as the very fact that one is about to embark on stage 1 of the plan indicates that the Holy Spirit has not yet seen fit so to move one.

sinning. Purgatory is God's way of ensuring that an argument such as the one I am seeking to develop for Bartianism won't go through. That's 'God's angle'.<sup>10</sup>

So, remembering that we are taking it that a traditional theistic worldview may be assumed, the crucial issue is whether, on such a worldview, 4\* is plausible and in particular whether it is more plausible than 4. Even if it's somewhat less plausible than 4, as long as it's not clearly wrong, its availability as an alternative hypothesis will – to the extent that it's plausible – rationally weaken one's confidence in 4 even if one in the end regards 4 as more plausible than 4\*. I want to proceed relatively quickly and so I hope I shall be forgiven for painting with a broad brush here, but – broad strokes then – I think that on grounds quite independent of this argument, many Roman Catholics will find 4\* more plausible than 4; but on grounds equally independent many Protestants will find 4 more plausible than 4\*.<sup>11</sup>

For completeness, I point out that one doesn't actually need premise 4 exactly as stated to get one farther along the road towards justifying the Bartian conclusion at which the argument I am considering is aiming. There are any number of tweaked versions of things along the lines of 4 which can block the problematic 'outs' to which 4\* points.

Consider the following.

Premise 4\*\*

*If one repents of one's sins prior to one's death, then there will be (a) no or (b) less post-mortem harm coming one's way as God will either (a) not punish one for them at all or (b) not punish one for them to such an extent that any of those sins which brought more net benefit ante-mortem than did any non-sinful action available to one at the times in question have these beneficial effects cancelled out by post-mortem harms.*

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<sup>10</sup> Presumably nobody would contest the claim that God should see to it that the punishment – and remember this may be conceived of as the punishment intrinsic to one's coming (with a sanctified conscience) to a full and fully remorseful knowledge of one's sinfulness – which comes to one as a result of one's sinfulness is the (a?) just punishment. And it is plausible (though not incontestable) that justice does not demand that the punishment-harm equal or outweigh the sinfully-obtained-benefit that came to one as a result of the sin for which it is punishment, but rather that it be proportionate to the evil of the sin for which it is punishment. And this is where much of the 'trouble' for resisting Bartianism arises.

So, for example, it seems that we can construct a case where two employees, A and B, in identical circumstances, each embezzle the same amount of money from their employer and do so in the same way. However morally bad this act of embezzlement is then, however grave a sin, it's equally bad for both A and B. Employee A then invests and uses the stolen money wisely and gains great *ante-mortem* benefit from it; employee B, by contrast, squanders it all on fripperies and gains very little *ante-mortem* benefit from it. Justice would seem to dictate that the remorse each should feel (or if in the Last Judgment be made by God to feel) is the same – proportionate to how evil the act of embezzlement was, not scaled by reference to how sensible each subsequently was in using the monies they'd embezzled with the more sensible A being punished more severely than the less sensible B. And, as I say, if so, this is where the 'trouble' comes from as it seems at least not *a priori* knowable that A mightn't have got so much benefit *ante-mortem* from the embezzling and the sinfulness of the embezzling been so low, that the appropriate remorse will *not* be sufficiently punishing to overbalance it. (Though of course, we are – in considering 4\* – supposing that God will ensure that it is sufficient; that's, as I put it in the main text, 'God's angle' to defeat Bartianism.)

<sup>11</sup> There is a distinction overlooked here between mortal and venial sins; overlooking it simplifies matters, but including it in a fuller discussion of a 4\*-type claim would not affect the fundamental issues.



In essence then, premise 4\*\* simply blocks-off the escape route from the argument that supposition 4\* directed one down. But these sorts of tweaks, whilst they may succeed in making premises of the 4-type, as we might then seek to slot one of them into the argument at this stage, as ‘weak’ as they can be if the substitution of one of them is yet to support the developing argument, seem to me to make the 4-type premise *less* plausible than the untweaked and more bold 4 as it stands, due to their complexities and ‘ad-hoc-ery’. So, I suggest, the ‘real’ choice for the traditional theist is between something closely along the lines of 4 and something closely along the lines of 4\*.

4\* stops the argument in its tracks. So what can be said for 4 over it? In particular can enough be said to mean that the availability of 4\*, even if it isn’t as plausible as 4, doesn’t sufficiently weaken the plausibility of 4 to mean that the argument I am seeking to develop runs out of significant steam at this stage? Well, there are many things that one might say in favour of 4 – Theology is full of them. But let me motivate 4 with a story. It is not an original story. You have probably heard it before.

In the parable of the prodigal son (*Luke* 15, 11-32), Jesus’ description of the prodigal son’s thoughts as he builds up to his decision to return home so as to throw himself on his father’s mercy leads us to consider a number of possible reactions that the father might have. It may of course be that the father will refuse to admit the returning prodigal to his household *simpliciter*. This then may be taken to be equivalent to God’s sending the repentant sinner to Hell or to annihilation. But the son dares to hope for more; he dares to hope that the father will employ him as hired help around the farm; perhaps the father will give him the opportunity to work off his debt and thus raise himself by his own efforts back up towards the level enjoyed by the non-prodigal elder son, a son who has remained an unquestioned member of the household throughout the period of the prodigal son’s wanderings. This then may be taken to be equivalent to God’s sending the repentant sinner to Purgatory before elevating him or her to Heaven. As the son reflects on the matter, even his father’s hired hands are better off than he currently is, him being reduced at this stage to contemplating eating pig food. And so, Jesus tells us, the son determines to return; and so we are led to wonder which of these – exclusion or conditional inclusion – will be his fate. As Jesus unfolds the story, we are given our answer.

We read that while the son “was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.” Servants were called to get him the best robe; a ring was placed on his finger; shoes on his feet; and the most sumptuous feast the father could manage was prepared. The overtopping of the son’s most daring hope is striking. It is not that he was excluded - finding the door resolutely shut in his face. It is not even that he was conditionally included, the father – stony-faced and arms-crossed, as it were – standing on his porch, waiting for the son to make his stumbling way to collapse at his feet and then, with perhaps a polite nod of acknowledgment, directing him in, to the servants’ quarters. Rather, whilst the son was ‘yet at a distance’ (some translations have this as ‘far off’), the *father* moves towards the *son*. And he moves at speed – he runs – and, when he reaches his son, his arms are open. The very fact that the father was at whatever vantage point it was such that he could see the son ‘at a distance’ is itself suggestive of the thought that the father has been actively searching for any sign of his son’s return, scanning the horizon and hoping for it; perhaps he has been keeping his lonely vigil ever since the son first left, in which case he would have been keeping it for at least a matter of months, possibly for years. In any case, now the moment the father has been yearning for has finally come – he has

seen his son and, even if at this moment his son can only have appeared as a small ‘far off’ figure, the father has recognised him nonetheless. And now he has recognised him, he is closing the distance between them as quickly as he has it in his power to do.

It is impossible to read this story as telling us anything other than that the son’s repentance, the moment it has become known to the father, has brought the son immediate and total forgiveness and immediate and total removal of any possibility of punishment.<sup>12</sup>

Much more could be said, but 4 seems plausible, to me anyway.

#### Premise 5

*So, one gains the maximum benefit possible by sinning whenever doing so would bring one more net ante-mortem benefit than would any other non-sinful action available to one and then repenting between the moment of the last such choice one faces and one’s death.*

Premise 5 follows from 1-4, so whatever overall plausibility the argument maintained until and including 4, 5 inherits. To get this far, we’ve had to travel via a couple of premises which I have tentatively graded as ‘plausible’ and each of which is necessary for the argument to get us this far, so that is hardly going to transpose over into a ringing endorsement of the plausibility of 5. Still, for what it’s worth, my own assessment is that the ‘law of diminishing probability’-effect hasn’t yet dropped the stage of the argument which we’ve got to down into the implausible range. One could no doubt seek to be more precise than I have sought to be and assign probabilities to each premise – 1-4 - and thus calculate more precisely where, assuming these were the right probabilities to assign, that leaves the probability of 5. For myself, I am reluctant to do that as it would give a spurious appearance of precision to my judgments on the relevant matters. And so I stick with the vaguer (but more accurate as a reflection of my understanding of things) talk of things being ‘somewhat plausible’ and so on.

#### Premise 6.

*So one is prudentially rational in adopting whatever policy with regards to sinning and repentance the adoption of which will give one the best chances of living so as to get the maximum benefit.*

6 follows from the definition of prudential rationality given in 2 and - with 5’s characterisation of maximum benefit in mind - we seem to be getting very close indeed now to our aimed-at conclusion, the vindication of Bartianism.

Now though we come to a sticky patch for the argument; indeed, to announce my own verdict early, I judge that this is where the argument for Bartianism gets stuck altogether. To cover this

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<sup>12</sup> Dave Leal, who kindly provided comments on this paper, reports a more negative assessment of the story, telling me that whatever the prodigal son was doing, it wasn’t repenting (it was perhaps more a calculated act of feigning repentance); that Donald Mackinnon has described the story as representing God in the persona of ‘a silly old fool’; and that another distinguished author (unnamed here as the thought was provided in a conversation with him which she may have supposed would not find its way into print) has described the parable as her least favourite passage of scripture, her blaming the father for letting the son head-off in the first place – ‘What was he thinking of?’

final distance, the argument needs the policy – life-plan as I have sometimes been calling it – that one is prudentially rational in adopting in the light of what has been established so far (to whatever degree it has been established) to be the self-conscious policy of sinning whenever doing so would produce greater net *ante-mortem* benefits than not doing so; and then of course repenting at the last moment. But its being *this* policy which is the most prudentially rational one to adopt is going to be a function in part of how frequent net beneficial *ante-mortem* sins are and it will be recalled that I was helped in justifying premise 1 (to whatever extent I did manage to justify it) by pointing out how minimal a claim it was, how its truth was compatible with there being only one such sin in the whole history of the universe. Although I went on to ‘chance my hand’, as I put it, that such sins were much more widespread than that, that was something of a throwaway comment. And we can now see that the argument plausibly needs them to be much more widespread than that at this stage so as to justify Bartianism. (More precisely: more widespread, more beneficial, or less likely to be punished severely would do it.) So, if we’re going to keep the argument going, we’re going to have to go back and bolster 1 along those lines, or we’re going to have to introduce some new premise at this stage that bolsters it (a new premise from which 1 would follow and thus become redundant as one reconfigured one’s argument). Why so? Well, consider this.

If – say – there is over the course of an average person’s life only one opportunity to sin yet gain greater net *ante-mortem* benefit than had anything non-sinful been done and if the level of net *ante-mortem* benefit of this one sin is on average very low, then one would probably, by adopting a policy of self-consciously looking for it throughout one’s life (as per Bartianism), miss out on greater benefits that would have come to one had one followed a life-plan other than Bartianism. Here is something I take to be a parallel case which I hope will illustrate the point.

I get lots of generic mass emails from people who announce themselves as having business opportunities which they would like to discuss with me as – so they say – they would be mutually financially beneficial. Perhaps over the course of my life I’ll get 10,000 such offers. And let’s suppose for the sake of argument that one of these is in fact a business opportunity which, were I to take it, would be financially beneficial to me, say to the tune of several thousand pounds. Still, the fact that I am – as per premise 6 *mutatis mutandis* - prudentially rational in adopting towards such emails whatever policy it is the adoption of which will give me the best chances of getting the maximum benefit (benefit in this case being of a sort that may be considered solely in financial terms) does *the opposite* of licensing me in studying each of these ten thousand emails in sufficient detail so that I am able to sift out the one nugget of gold from the huge pile of nine-thousand-nine-hundred-and-ninety-nine pieces of iron pyrites. That sifting would take an inordinate amount of time and in this context the cogent point to make is that ‘time is money’; clearly, I’d be better-off financially if I adopted a policy of simply deleting/marketing as spam *all* such emails over the course of my life and devoted whatever time I would have needed to devote to the alternative sifting policy to some other more remunerative activity; I could take on a bit of extra teaching, say. In other words, I can be prudentially rational in adopting a policy which I know means that on some particular occasion I will fail to avail myself of the benefit that would have come to me had I looked in detail at the business opportunity that was before me on that particular occasion, as I know that to look in enough detail on sufficient occasions so as to be able to pick out that occasion - the ‘winner’, as it were - would be for me to have failed to do what was to my greater benefit.

This point carries over then, I am suggesting, to the domain of sin and it carries over for the vast majority even if not quite all of us. (Stewart Goetz points out to me that the same may not be true for someone like Joseph Stalin.) It may well be that – as per something along the lines of premise 1 – each of us will sometimes be in situations in which sinning will bring us greater net benefit *ante-mortem* than not doing so, but, nevertheless it may well be (I am now suggesting probably is) that we benefit ourselves more *ante-mortem* by adopting a blanket ‘never wilfully sin’ policy than we would do by adopting the more fine-grained ‘Do the cost/benefit/risk analysis in each case’ sifting policy that is Bartianism.<sup>13</sup> (The argument here parallels the considerations which drive some from Act Consequentialism to Rule Consequentialism, a parallel to which I shall return momentarily.)

Given this problem for the argument for Bartianism as it stands, then, as I have already indicated, one might consider going back to ‘bolster’, as I put it, premise 1 with consequent reconstruction of the argument elsewhere. If one substituted something like premise 1\* as I am about to give it for premise 1 as it stands now, that would provide enough impetus – if it is acceptable – to keep the argument moving forward over the ground that I’ve latterly mapped and have suggested premise 1 is insufficient to propel it past.

Premise 1\*

*In every situation of choice we find ourselves in we have open to us sinful actions which are such that they would produce much greater net ante-mortem benefit for us than would any other non-sinful action available to us on those occasions.*

But I take it that premise 1\*, whatever jet-power it could impart to the argument if it were to be accepted, will not be accepted as it is plainly false. There are other options here, replace the ‘every’ in 1\* with something a bit weaker, and so on. But – to cut what could be a long story short – I don’t think any of them are going to work. I think the reasons given mean that we need to abandon the project of arguing in this general fashion for Bartianism as stated; and we need to move to consider a more modest Bartian view.

One could call this more modest view ‘Tactical Bartianism’, by way of contrast with the ‘Strategic Bartianism’ which has hitherto been in view, but I shall actually call it ‘modified Bartianism’. Modified Bartianism doesn’t encourage one to go through life actively looking for opportunities to gainfully sin (as per unmodified Bartianism); far from it; but it suggests that on, no doubt rare,

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<sup>13</sup> One of the referees who kindly provided comments on this paper considered that a Bartian position might not require this – routinely checking to see whether some potential sinful action would be net beneficial *ante-mortem*. ‘Why couldn’t she simply adopt a policy of not caring whether potential actions are sinful at all, and simply do whatever actions – sinful or not – seem most *ante-mortem* beneficial?’, the referee asked. I think this is not a realistic alternative to the view engaged with in the main text for most theists – only for a certain sort of psychopath. Most theists cannot bring themselves not to care whether or not an action is sinful and not to take an action’s being sinful as a reason not to do it. For most then, the only psychologically realistic option along Bartian lines is to weigh that care against other considerations. Some people (the other referee for this paper would be an example, as their position was discussed in the main text at the start of the paper) cannot bring themselves to think that an action’s being sinful is not in itself an overwhelming reason to refrain from doing it and indeed cannot imagine any religious believer not sharing this extreme – Billy-Sunday-like – aversion to sin.

occasions, one will nevertheless be prudentially rational in taking such opportunities for gainful sinning as one suddenly notices have presented themselves.

As I mentioned parenthetically a moment ago, there are parallels with discussions had about Consequentialism. Let us step back for a moment from the topic of this paper and sketch some of these discussions, before drawing the material thus sketched over to help us with our issue; I shall contend that the considerations presented against Rule Consequentialism apropos of situations where certain calculations have already in effect been done can be used to justify us in thinking that a modified Bartianism has more hopes of success than Bartianism as originally formulated. Here are the considerations. (To get to the most relevant, we need to start from a bit further back.)

One of the attractions of Rule Consequentialism over Act is that it seems to offer the promise of allowing its proponents to avoid certain counterintuitive implications of Act. We'll all be familiar with the (hackneyed but cogent) objection to Act Consequentialism that in the right thought-experimental conditions, it renders it morally obligatory for a doctor to murder one hospital patient so as to harvest their organs and use them to save the lives of five others; but that action of murder seems obviously wrong; and that obvious wrongness is evidence that Act Consequentialism is wrong. Rule Consequentialism can seem to offer one a way around this sort of objection. Plausibly the rule 'Don't kill patients' is a rule the following of which would (in conjunction with appropriate other rules) produce more good than would the rule 'Do whatever it is which you calculate in each individual case would maximize the good', which latter decision-procedure is the one licensed by Act Consequentialism. And, if so, then it is plausible that Rule Consequentialism is a view the adoption of which will have better consequences than would Act. If all of that is so, then - skipping along a bit too briskly perhaps - if Consequentialism is true as a theory of the good, Rule Consequentialism is the version of it which should be adopted as a theory of the right; and, if it is adopted as such, then, given that the rules to be followed will include the 'Don't kill patients' rule, so one's adopted decision-procedure will in fact prohibit one from doing just the thing that it was intuitive to think morality does prohibit one from doing. One up for Rule Consequentialism over Act, then. However, as Williams amongst others has pointed out, this cannot work for a situation in which the results that would have been obtained had one performed an Act Consequentialist calculation have forced themselves on one's consciousness, as then one is in a position where one must either knowingly fail to produce as much good as one could and thus fail to be a true Consequentialist or produce as much good as one could but thereby abandon the rule.<sup>i</sup>

So, how does this apply to our considerations of Bartianism? It seems to me that the arguments of the previous paragraph show that even if the original Bartian position, which was the analogue of the Act Consequentialist one with regards to one's own benefit maximisation, cannot be upheld for the reasons I have said it cannot be upheld, there will still be scope for defending a modified Bartianism, which focuses on situations where one has in effect already done the relevant calculations.

On a modified Bartianism, one will have adopted the general rule of avoiding sinfulness in deference to the points that have been made against unmodified Bartianism to date; one will not then be looking to assess one's options in each case of choice to see if any of the sinful options available to one would bring one more net *ante-mortem* benefit than would any non-sinful action one might perform instead. No, one will in general be following the rule 'Don't sin' for all the

beneficial consequences one correctly sees following this general rule will bring to one over those that would have been brought to one had one calculated the benefits of each option available to one in each situation of choice. One will in effect be sending every email that one sees coming from sin straight to the rubbish bin/spam folder. Nevertheless, in a situation where the fact that one of one's options does meet the description of being a sinful action which would bring one more net *ante-mortem* benefit than would any other non-sinful action has made itself known to one's consciousness entirely unbidden, it would be prudentially irrational to ignore this fact and go on doing what one full-well knew would be sub-optimal in terms of one's self-interest.

The modified Bartian we are now imagining them is inclined to say something like this: "Sure, it's not prudentially rational for me to go for a 'life of sin'; far from it. It's not even prudentially rational for me to allow myself to think on any occasion whether or not a particular sinful action may be one of those that would bring me greater net *ante-mortem* benefit than would any non-sinful action available to me. Rather, the very fact that I notice of something that it would be a sinful action were I to perform it is sufficient for me to rule it out. My prudentially rational policy is, so to speak, to keep the door resolutely shut to sin whenever it comes knocking announcing itself as such. But today, perhaps because I didn't immediately notice that a particular action would be a sin were I to commit it, I realised of a particular action, which only a moment later did I conclude would be sinful, that it was one that would bring me net much greater *ante-mortem* benefit than would any other non-sinful action. So, that has meant that today prudential rationality has compelled me to sin, planning of course to repent later and thus (given 4) get, as it were, 'the best of both worlds'."

This modified Bartian view is harder to argue against than the unmodified Bartian view. I have suggested that one can defeat unmodified Bartianism without considering the nature of repentance, but to defeat modified Bartianism, one needs to consider the nature of repentance.<sup>14</sup> And it's not clear it can be defeated even then. Let's see.

Let's consider then what must be involved in repentance for 4 (or anything functionally like it) to be true. For 4 (or anything like it) to be true, the repentance needed cannot be founded on a regret which in turn is based solely on prudential reasons, that is reasons to do with the net benefits/harms that will differentially be coming to one as a result of the action depending on whether or not one does in fact repent of it. We can see the paradox that would be generated were God – *per impossibile* – to hinge his decisions about whether or not to punish on the presence solely of this sort of prudential regret by imagining a deathbed conversation along the following lines.

God: "Excuse me for intruding, but I thought you'd like to know: your time on Earth is about to be up. Quick question: do you repent of all your sins?"

Sinner: "Indeed I do. I sincerely repent of all of them."

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<sup>14</sup> For a recent discussion, see N. Oren, 'A Philosophical account of repentance' in *Religious Studies*, 2022; references are given there to several Jewish thinkers who engage with the rationality of unmodified Bartianism. Space does not permit me to repeat these references, *a fortiori* provide details of the wider discussion in the Jewish tradition which he kindly talked to me about on his recent visit to Oxford.

God: “Very well, then I shall not punish you for your sins. Enter thou the Kingdom, as I like to put it. (Peter, open ye that pearly gate wide.)”

Sinner: “Enter me the Kingdom, eh? So, I got the net benefits *ante-mortem* of various sins and won’t now be getting the harms by way of punishment that would have cancelled them out; I’m now on track then to get ‘the best of both worlds’; I gambled and I won; naturally then I don’t regret having gambled. Now I know I’m not going to be punished for them, I don’t repent of all my sins (in particular I don’t repent of those that did contribute positively to this pay off).”

God: “Hang on a minute; in that case, punishment is back on the table. (Peter, shut the gate!) The punishment was only taken off the table on the presumption that you were repentant of all your sins and now you’re not, well then here comes my colleague with the pitchfork...”

Sinner: “No, *you* hang on a minute; at around the moment you said ‘here comes my colleague with the pitchfork’ I reverted back to my fully repentant state, as per my first answer. Of course I did, for it is precisely the prospect of punishment when it is on the table which is sufficient (and necessary) to make me genuinely regret what I have done in this regard; and, trust me, I’m doing that repentance right now – boy, that pitchfork looks pointy.”

God: “Ah well, in that case, off the table punishment goes.”

Sinner: “And in that case, off the table repentance goes.”

God: “Hang on a minute...”

And the loop continues *ad infinitum*.

So, to avoid this paradox, God cannot premise the lifting of punishment (or even the diminution of it beyond a certain point) on repentance if the regret element of the repentance is based solely on these self-interested reasons.<sup>15</sup> One’s regret for one’s sin has to be based on its immorality, not on its imprudence as its imprudence is precisely the moving part of the machine of justice, the part which moves depending on whether one may pull the lever of repentance in the right sense. And to give one the power to pull *that* lever (repentance understood as it must be being understood in a 4-type claim), the moral wrongness of the sin has to be the grounds of the regret. So, it’s not enough to be ‘genuinely’ or ‘sincerely’ sorry for sinning for the attitude that is then engendered to be repentance in the sense operative in premise 4 (or any variation of it); it’s what grounds that sorrow which is important. If there isn’t enough moral regret in these grounds, then no amount of amoral regret can make up for it. One sometimes comes across cases of the phenomenon of poor grounding in earthly justice systems. An example may help to illustrate the point.

A case recently in the papers at time of writing quoted a convicted murderer expressing his apparently sincere and deep regret for his having murdered the young couple who had lived next-

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<sup>15</sup> In conversation, Nick Waghorn has suggested to me that being caught in such an endless loop might be a just end-state for such a person, ‘locked forever ...in galling vacillation’. They end up, not in a Dante-like Heaven, Purgatory, or Hell, but stuck forever in a waiting room; the doors to each of Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory lead from there, but their psychology is everlasting fixed such that they can never open any of them.

door to him and with whom he had had disputes about parking places; as far as one could tell, this young man really and deeply did wish he had not killed them. But his regret was apparently based solely on his now being sentenced to whatever punishment it was to which he was being sentenced. It was a sort of ‘And now I hear that the parking at the prison in which I’ll be spending the next thirty years is even worse, you can imagine how much I’m kicking myself!’ response. It wasn’t moral regret, but self-interested regret. And that can’t ground repentance in the sense that must be being intended in a 4-type truth. Although the terms are contested, we may perhaps express the point by saying that he felt plenty of regret but no remorse (or not enough remorse, anyway). Repentance of the sort that 4-type truths must (to avoid the paradox sketched above) be referencing needs the moral sort of regret – remorse as we are calling it. Well, I say this.

Stewart Goetz has raised with me the possibility that what is crucial to whether or not one counts as repenting in the right sense (or perhaps repenting *per se*) is not what grounds any feeling of regret for having committed the sin in question, but rather what reasons one acts on in performing the action which, if the right reasons are acted on, constitutes the action of repentance (and if not, then not). For simplicity, let us consider the thing the doing of which is a contender for being an act of repentance the (possibly illocutionary) act of saying ‘I repent.’ With that detail added, the view under consideration now then is that, if one utters this sentence due to the reason that it is the morally right sentence to utter, then one repents by uttering it; if one utters it for self-interested reasons, one does not. If one then adds the thesis that one may act on the reason that uttering this sentence is the morally right thing to do even without remorse for the sin it references, then it is thus possible to repent in the sense relevant to premises of the 4-type without remorse. However, I am not myself sure how or whether this could work. Is this not the morally right sentence to utter *only if* it is a true sentence to utter? God isn’t wanting an insincere uttering of ‘I repent’, I take it. But, if we grant that, then isn’t what makes the sentence ‘I repent’ true the fact one’s managed to get into a state of repentance prior to uttering it, not something which one accomplishes with the uttering of it? And, as I think about what that state is – how it seems to me from the inside when I take myself to know that it is present - it does seem to me to involve feeling the appropriate remorse for what it is one is about to have in mind when one then utters the sentence, ‘I repent.’

Perhaps there are some psychopaths who never feel any remorse for anything they do, however heinous. But most of us are not like that; we have a capacity for remorse and we utilise it; we feel some remorse at least (even if not enough?) for many (even if not every?) wrong we believe ourselves to have done. And sometimes the amount of remorse we anticipate feeling (*ante-mortem*) if we commit a sin is sufficient to stop us going ahead and sinning in that particular. But sometimes of course it is not.

So, what must be going on in a particular situation if the modified Bartian approach is going to be prudentially justified in that situation is that one is correctly calculating that the net *ante-mortem* benefits of a sinful action available to one are greater than those which would come to one from any non-sinful alternative, giving one then prudential reason to sin in this particular way on this particular occasion, *presuming* one may avoid the *post-mortem* punishment that would come to one were one to die unrepentant. One may in doing this calculation anticipate some remorse being felt immediately after the sin, but presumably not so much that one will instantly regret doing it altogether. Otherwise, one wouldn’t be about to do it. Thus, one must be anticipating that one will (or at least it’s sufficiently likely that one will), prior to one’s death, feel sufficiently more remorse



than the amount, if any, one is predicting feeling in the short-term, so that one may ultimately repent (sufficiently more so that one does repent, but not so much more that its painful nature cancels out the benefit the sin brought).

It looks then as if such a modified Bartian approach to an individual decision could be adopted. It is not psychologically impossible to think this way, nor is it obviously confused to do so (presuming one may predict at least one's probable future free choices). But there's something a bit odd going on here.

The modified Bartian approach to this particular decision strikes me as an analogue to someone thinking, "Well, if I am going to be able to resist chocolate cake from next week onwards, then the fact that I'm about to scoff this whole cake today won't have done me any ultimate harm; and I can be tolerably confident that I will indeed be able to resist; so I can be tolerably confident that I'm prudentially rational in scoffing this chocolate cake now." That could be a coherent and prudentially rational approach to the decision to eat a particular chocolate cake now. But of course one has to wonder on what basis one *could* be tolerably confident that one's powers for resisting the temptations of chocolate cake will be greater next week than they are now; and of course one cannot help but wonder if one's not resisting the temptations of chocolate cake now won't, if anything, make it even less likely that one will be in a better position to resist these temptations next week than if one had resisted the temptations now. Incipient alcoholics aren't – one supposes – best advised to drink more now as this will mean that they find their inclination to drink later diminished and/or their willpower in overcoming the desire to drink strengthened. And of course the same applies *mutatis mutandis* for sinfulness. What would you say as a marriage guidance counsellor to someone who opined, "I'm figuring that if I commit a lot of adultery now, just after we've come back from our honeymoon, then I can be tolerably confident that I'm going to have got it out of my system and will manage to be perfectly faithful from then on"? But, notwithstanding these worries about whether or not this sort of tactic is actually likely to work, I take it that it is metaphysically possible that it *could* work. Here's what seems to me a metaphysically possible way it could work (it might not be a nomic possibility).

A certain conscience-enhancement pill becomes widely available and at negligible cost. The conscience-enhancement pill has the effect of elevating one's moral sensitivity to the necessary level for appropriate remorse (as well as perfecting one's memories of every morally evaluable action one has ever performed). It has no other side effects. Within a moment of swallowing a conscience-enhancement pill, one thus feels sufficient moral remorse for even the smallest and most forgettable of sins one has committed to mean that one repents wholeheartedly for all of them. Well then, if one keeps one of these pills on one's person and stands ready to swallow it on one's deathbed, the reasons I have been latterly examining against modified Bartianism being likely to actually work fall away. Of course one may ask, just how punishing will the taking of the conscience-enhancing pill need to be to give one sufficient remorse? If it is knowably going to need to be sufficiently punishing to overbalance any prior benefits of sinning, then this is in effect for the argument for even modified Bartianism to be blocked by something along the lines of 4\*. This is an issue to which we shall return in considering just how punishing the remorse one will feel at the Last Judgment (on most accounts) will be.<sup>16</sup> But it is certainly true that any form of

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<sup>16</sup> Stewart Goetz has raised with me the thought that if the modified Bartian is acting solely on self-interested reasons in taking the pill, then the effects of his or her doing so will be worthless with regards to avoiding punishment –

Bartianism needs to bear in mind the anticipated harms (in the sense we are using the term) that attend the planned-for act of repentance and count these against the benefits before forming his/her judgement of net benefit (the act of repentance is after all an *ante-mortem* event on the accounts we've been considering so far [that will change in a moment]).

The conscience-enhancement pill is a fiction, of course, but those attracted to the theistic worldview might think that there is something functionally similar. So, suppose one has acted in accordance with modified Bartianism throughout one's life and one now gets to what one knows to be one's deathbed, having thus far been unrepentant about the committing of various sins. One could hardly say then that one had put as much effort as one could have done into improving one's character or conscientiousness; one could hardly claim that one's capacity for appropriate remorse had been carefully cultivated over one's lifetime to date. Nevertheless, nor could one truly be said to have let one's character or conscience wither away entirely. One realises that one now has pressing prudential reasons to grow one's capacity for remorse to the requisite level for one to genuinely repent of all one's sins to date. And one fears that it is perhaps now rather 'too late in the day' for one to expect to be able to do so. What can one do? Well, there is no conscience-enhancement pill to help. But there is an omnipotent God and anything that's metaphysically possible (as we have assumed the conscience-enhancement pill is) is possible for Him. So, instead of taking a pill, one may pray. "Please Lord, convict me of my sin." (A parenthetical note: the word 'convict' here is being used in what may be a somewhat *recherché* theological sense; it means something along the lines of 'Bring it home to me/help me feel its moral wrongness/discomfort me with myself for being so sanguine about it all up until now/engender appropriate remorse for it in me' – that sort of thing.) Can one expect one's prayer to be answered in the manner one has asked for it to be answered? Well, it certainly might be. But then again it might not be.

So, what if in general such prayers are ineffective on deathbeds when uttered by those who, prior to then, have been unrepentant sinners? Even so, it seems to me that prayers of this sort, whilst not themselves acts of repentance may come close enough in moral space to being such so as to make something like 4 go through for them. To illustrate what I have in mind here, let us imagine the following conversation between God and a sinner as held on the latter's deathbed.

Sinner: "Okay, so, as we both well know, I don't have it in me to summon up enough remorse for my *ante-mortem* sins so that I can repent of them in the relevant sense. But I do genuinely regret (though perhaps not feel remorse again) the fact that I have by now made myself into the sort of person who cannot summon up sufficient remorse to repent in the relevant sense. I've prayed that you convict me, and you have not. I cannot then repent in the relevant sense. But the prayer was sincere; I do sincerely wish that I were able to repent and did repent in that relevant sense. Is that enough for you?"

God: "You know what? (Drumroll, Peter, please.) ... It is! Enter thou the Kingdom, as I like to say."

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'doesn't your scenario simply relocate the issue of whether one will choose for the moral reason or the reason of self-interest?' I however do not see it that way. Even if the action of taking the pill is purely self-interested, it occasions a change of psychology such that one is then able to perform a second action, the action of repenting in the sense necessary to avoid punishment.

If that is what God would say, then it seems that something like 4\*\*\* is true, where 4\*\*\* reads as follows.

Premise 4\*\*\*

*If one repents of one's sins prior to one's death or even if one just prays for this and wishes of oneself that one were able to and did repent, then there will be no post-mortem punishment; God will not punish one for one's sins at all.*

Now, I have been relatively sympathetic towards 4\*\*\* and some who have been kind enough to offer comments on this paper have been far more sceptical, one commenting that the relevant action is not 'in moral space at all'. So, without wishing to commit to it, let me simply observe that *if* we swap out the original 4 for 4\*\*\* and make some other adjustments to what follows, the modified Bartian approach will potentially be justified. I pass no judgement on how big an 'if' that is.

Variations on 4 as discussed so far suppose that one has to get one's repentance (or prayer for conviction/sincere attempt at/wish for it, if one is attracted to something like 4\*\*\*) done prior to death and the claim that death does constitute the 'final deadline', as it were, for the completion of stage two of the plan, as we have sometimes called it, is not entailed by the traditional theistic worldview we have been assuming as the background here. Some theists have held that after our deaths we have another chance at repentance; and one in epistemically and motivationally better circumstances. After death, we appear before God at the Last Judgment; there we are indeed convicted of our sins; that is in part at least what constitutes it as the Last Judgment. So there we shall – all of us - feel remorse sufficient to repent; and, on at least one variant of the account, by repenting we shall – all of us - actually avoid the punishment thereafter that would otherwise have been our due. Such a Universalist picture may be presented then as accepting a version of 4 that simply omits the 'prior to death' clause and adds a claim that we shall all as a matter of fact satisfy the condition of which it speaks. Let's suppose that this view is right, and let's say - to push aside certain Pascal's-Wager-type points - knowably right with certainty *ante-mortem*. This initially looks as if it makes modified Bartianism *impregnable*. Heaven is guaranteed for all, so everyone is getting the best of that world; Bartianism in its modified form, even if it doesn't ensure that one gets the best of this world too at least ensures that one never knowingly and wilfully fails to get the best of it; it's an *ante-mortem* prudentially better approach than any alternative.

So, what, if anything, may be said against the prudential rationality of modified Bartianism on this variant of the theistic worldview? There is something. It's not quite impregnable.

Let's consider how things are going to play out on this view. One gets to the Last Judgment and let's say one hasn't actually repented of one's sins prior to then – on one's deathbed, say – and so one expects God to fully convict one of these sins now, thus completing stage two of the plan for one, as it were. Just how punishing an experience will this conviction be? In particular, will it be a harm (in the sense we are using the term) that outweighs any net *ante-mortem* benefits that one's modified-Bartian sinning has produced? Can one in fact reasonably expect the Last Judgment to be so punishing that it in effect makes the experience equivalent to the Purgatory of 4\*? If something like that is right, and knowably right with a high degree of confidence, then even on

this sort of theistic Universalism, modified Bartianism is not going to be prudentially rational. But on this crucial matter I find myself uncertain.

It certainly seems that when a sinner is exposed directly to God's glorious presence, the worse and more initially unrepentant they are, the more hellish that refiner's fire will seem to them in the furnace of self-knowledge it brings with it, as it burns away their egotism and raises their remorse for it to boiling point. My phrasing in that last sentence has not been designed to suggest that I think it will be pleasant. But whether it will be sufficiently punishing to be functionally equivalent to the Purgatory of 4\* is something which I at least cannot discern with confidence, at least yet. In discussion, my colleague Nick Waghorn has suggested that we can reasonably believe it will be sufficiently punishing; when we look our past sins squarely in the face with the consciences of saints, we will find them objects of 'screaming horror'; Anselm would no doubt agree. But that seems excessive. When Andy looks back on the fact that he once pilfered a paperclip from work for personal use, surely the remorse he should feel will not be sufficiently great to make that recollected peccadillo the object of screaming horror, rather something more like wincing unease. And perhaps that paperclip brought Andy great *ante-mortem* benefit, in a reverse 'For the want of a nail...' scenario. Let me leave that issue hanging for a moment then and say by way of conclusion a few words summing up the journey which has taken us to this point.

In conclusion, the straightforward Bartian life-plan – going through life looking for opportunities to sin and gain net *ante-mortem* benefit from such sins (relative to the benefit one might have got from the non-sinful options available) whilst planning of course to repent prior to one's death and thus avoid any *post-mortem* downsides – can be shown to be prudentially irrational on various plausible assumptions without needing to consider the exact nature of repentance. By contrast, following a policy of eschewing sin - even if one suspects that by doing so one will thereby be missing out on a relatively small number of sins which would, were one to have indulged in them, have brought one slightly greater net *ante-mortem* benefits than one's other options and which one could in fact have later repented from and thus avoided their *post-mortem* downsides - is more prudentially rational.

However, the considerations which showed Bartianism not to be a prudentially justified life-plan left a modified Bartian approach to some individual instances of choice apparently prudentially rational. What it is prudentially rational to do in a situation where one realises that a sin is of the sort such that the net *ante-mortem* benefits will be greater than those that will come from any non-sinful action and of the sort such that one may later repent of it and avoid punishment, is to commit the sin. Or, in any case, that is what a modified Bartianism seemed plausibly to suggest.

In our attempts to show the prudential irrationality of modified Bartianism, we have latterly needed to consider the nature of repentance and in particular to show that the sort of repentance which is the only coherent basis on which God might waive punishment for sin is one involving what we have called 'remorse' in contrast to plain 'regret'; regret – however sincere – is not enough if it is based solely on prudential reasoning (for reasons to do with the paradox illustrated by our first imagined dialogue between God and a sinner on his deathbed). Even though (given the necessity for a remorse-basis to the punishment-avoiding repentance) the sinning which constitutes the first stage of the modified Bartian plan will itself be doing nothing to improve, rather than reduce, one's chances of becoming by natural means the sort of person who will be able to carry out the second

stage of the plan – the repentance stage - it is not metaphysically impossible that one might pull-off the second stage even having got to it via the first stage. Certain theological views (involving a *post-mortem* and universal repentance and salvation at the Last Judgment) *guarantee* that one does get to the second stage. However, even on these views, it is not clear that the *post-mortem* experience of the Last Judgment will not in itself be sufficiently punishing to be functionally equivalent to Purgatory as it was conceived by 4\*; and, if it is that punishing, it will be making even modified Bartianism imprudent. It is not clear that it will not be that punishing. But it is not clear that it *will* be that punishing. At least to me. So I am left unsure on this point. The issue I left hanging a moment ago is, as I said, one which I cannot determine, at least as yet.

Is agent A, at some stage in the future, going to feel so remorseful about act *s* (where *s* is a particular sin that modified Bartianism enjoins on A) should A indeed perform *s*, that A will repent of having done *s*? On this account, assuredly yes. Is it that for all values of *s*, the feeling of remorse as A will subsequently feel it for the doing of *s* is going to be so deep/intense that it be a sufficient harm, in the sense we are using the term, to outweigh the benefits that will have come to A between A's committing *s* and A's feeling this remorse? I do not know.

But this issue may be determined, if not by other means beforehand, then by us waiting and seeing what the Last Judgment brings to each of us. So, I close by saying that I hope you will forgive me if you find me on that last day as we take our places, instead of confidently reflecting on how well things seem to be working out for us all, muttering under my breath something concerning my being about to find out if certain of my chickens are going to be coming home to roost.<sup>ii 17</sup>

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09.23

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<sup>i</sup> The points I have just made will be familiar to some, but not all, and it may be that it will help those for whom they are not familiar if I quote a better philosopher than I making in his way the same points that I have just made in mine. In the passages below, Bernard Williams is talking explicitly about Utilitarianism, but his points generalise to Consequentialism more broadly. Here then is how Williams puts it:-

“It is certainly possible for a utilitarian, without inconsistency, to adopt a general practice for dealing with a certain kind of case, even though some particular applications of the practice produce a result different from what would have been reached by individual calculation of those instances. The paradigm of this is the accounting system of many public utilities, who may occasionally send out a bill for some very small sum, even though each bill costs more than that to process: the point being, that it is actually cheaper to send out all bills when due, however small the amount, rather than to interrupt the process to extract a few bills. Let us call this the ‘gas bill model’.” (B. Williams, *Morality, An Introduction to Ethics*, CUP, 1987, pages 105-106). And then, later (pages 107-108), “Turning once more to the gas bill model, we can recall that what principally made the uniform practice sensible was the cost of interfering with it. The analogy to this in ordinary moral thinking is the disutility of calculating particular consequences. But the effect of that argument is cancelled out if we consider a case in which the particular calculation *has already been made*: and this is so in the morally disquieting cases which presented the second kind of difficulty [this is the only kind of difficulty I have adverted to in the current paper] rule-utilitarianism was supposed to deal with. If calculation has already been made, and the consequences of breaking the rule are found better than those of keeping it; then certainly

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<sup>17</sup> I am grateful to Stewart Goetz, Dave Leal, Noam Oren, Nicholas Waghorn, and Mark Wynn for their comments on the first draft to this paper and to the two anonymous referees for this journal for their comments on the first draft submitted to it. Considerations of space have meant that I have not been able to explore all of the interesting avenues of thought down which these comments pointed me.

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no considerations about the disutility of calculation could upset that result...Whatever the general utility of having a certain rule, if one has actually reached the point of seeing that the utility of breaking it on a certain occasion is greater than that of following it, then surely it would be pure irrationality not to break it?"

<sup>ii</sup> One view that a part of me would like to be right is the view that God would find it intolerable if - in the end - self-interested reasons and moral reasons weren't always to push in the same direction - in the manner that Kant found it intolerable to suppose that reality might be that way - and so He'll be grading the *post-mortem* Last Judgment to ensure that even modified Bartianism does not pay-off for anyone. I feel some pull towards thinking that a world in which prudential reasons and moral reasons harmonise in this way would be better than the alternative, in that respect at least. But if the world's being better than the alternative in that respect would, in a particular repentant sinner's case, mean that it wouldn't be as good as it could be for that individual, I find myself asking if a God who loved *that individual* would go for the better-in-that-respect option. Of course, as well as loving that individual, God also loves everyone else and perhaps out of this love for the collective, He'll thus think that, notwithstanding what would be in that individual's best interests and how His love for that individual gives these interests great weight, it's nevertheless time for that individual to 'take one for the team'. All right, but how big a one would He then need the modified Bartian to take? Well, on this account, God's got to proportion how punishing this Last Judgment is so that not only is the harm (in the sense we are using the term) inherent in feeling the remorse in question sufficient for each person to repent of their sins, but also - and I am suggesting additionally - it is sufficient to mean that nobody would end up having benefitted from any acts of modified Bartianism in which they had engaged. That is, at any rate, how it seems most plausible to me that He would do it; I suppose He could add-on punishment in an entirely discrete way, discrete that is to the punishment inherent in feeling remorse. A certain number of pokes from the pitchfork of his colleague could be simply meted out. But it seems to me more appropriate for God to enhance the depth and painfulness of the remorse that the penitent sinner feels, as then the punishment retains an internal relationship to the sins in question. Either way, to hit that target, God only has to ensure that no modified-Bartian act means that anyone does better than they would have done because of that modified-Bartian act, not that they do worse. In other words, the sort of harmony He might be aiming at - that it was never ultimately the case that modified Bartianism prove to have been *more* in one's self-interest than simply seeking to eschew sin without exception - would not require Him to ensure it would always have been *more* in one's self-interest to eschew sin without exception; He could tolerate a tie. But that target - morality always being at least as good as sinfulness in terms of one's prudence - isn't the target Kant would have encouraged Him to be aiming at. And He could have aimed a little 'higher' - at morality always being *better than* sinfulness in terms of prudence. Were that to be the target that - out of His love for people collectively - God needed to try to hit, it would mean that the 'one' that the modified Bartian had to take for the team would be sufficiently punishing so as to make all their modified Bartian acts objectively imprudent. Still, in conditions of epistemic uncertainty about the relevant matters - such as, I take it, it will be uncontroversial we are in *ante-mortem* - the modified Bartian, as they observed these chickens finally being brought home to roost, could perhaps comfort themselves with the thought that, even though their gamble hadn't in the end paid off (and in fact, they would now be learning, even though it was always metaphysically impossible that it would ever pay off), on the information they had available to them at the time, it was subjectively reasonable for them to have gambled as they did.

I have been assuming in all this that the amount of punishment harm inherent in feeling remorse for an action sufficient to make one repent of it need not be as great as the benefit that that action brought to one. That seems obviously right to me, but someone might question this presumption.

If one leaves that as it is, one might of course say that someone who was truly remorseful would wish to undertake appropriate penance and that God would honour that wish; in effect then, this would be one asking to 'take one for the team', not God telling one it was time for one to do so. One might think it fitting (if supererogatory perhaps) to choose to ask God to make the remorse one felt for each sin sufficient to outweigh any benefit brought to one by it. And if one can predict that one will in this way - self-sabotagingly (from the point of view of prudence) - bring one's own chickens home to roost, that of course needs to be taken into account.