I. Pascal and Socrates

Pascal\textsuperscript{1} situates his famous wager inside an imagined conversation with a nonbeliever. He offers her the following argument:

Let us weigh the gain and the loss in wagering that God is. Let us estimate these two chances. If you gain, you gain all; if you lose, you lose nothing. Wager, then, without hesitation that He is.

He predicts that his interlocutor will accept the validity of this argument, and yet fail to come to believe in God. He anticipates this response on her part:

“Yes, but I have my hands tied and my mouth closed…. I am not released, and am so made that I cannot believe. What, then, would you have me do?”

Pascal answers:

True. But at least learn your inability to believe, since reason brings you to this, and yet you cannot believe.

He tells her, “Endeavour, then, to convince yourself,” and enjoins her to do this, “not by increase of proofs of God,” but by action. She is to imitate others who have made the transition from disbelief to belief:

Follow the way by which they began; by acting as if they believed, taking the holy water, having masses said, etc. Even this will naturally make you believe, and deaden your acuteness.

“But this is what I am afraid of.”

And why? What have you to lose?

Pascal does not continue the dialectic at this point—he does not allow his interlocutor to explain why she is afraid of coming to believe in the manner that he has described. Let me, therefore, respond on her behalf:

“I am afraid of tricking myself into believing in God. For trickery is the only route by which I can induce in myself a belief that I can see is profitable to hold,

\textsuperscript{1} \textit{Pensées}, Section III, § 233.
but lacking in evidential grounds. I am afraid that you are describing a process by which I gradually sink into self-deception.”

I cannot straightforwardly come to believe something on the strength of the observation that I will be better off in some respect—richer, healthier, or favored in the afterlife—if I believe it. In order to get someone else to believe what I think is beneficial for her as opposed to what I take to be true, I must deceive her; and the same is true in my own case. And this will require self-trickery—otherwise, as Sartre observed, “the lie falls back and collapses beneath my look; it is ruined from behind by the very consciousness of lying to myself which pitilessly constitutes itself well within my project as its very condition.”

Such an interlocutor is not necessarily claiming that it is impossible to deceive oneself—she may well believe that Pascal’s imitative method might work. In our day and age, it is easy to imagine a medical solution: she is offered a pill, or some brain surgery, that will effect in her a belief in God. I have some sympathy with the agnostic interlocutor’s unwillingness to inflict theism on herself by any of these means, even at the risk of eternal damnation.

But is it true that one can induce an acknowledgedly ungrounded belief in oneself only by way of wishful thinking or self-deception? Is there no straightforward, clear-eyed path to the acquisition of a belief (or an emotional reaction, or a form of motivation) which outstrips it rational basis in what I already know, desire, or feel?

Consider an ancient precursor of Pascal’s wager. In the Meno, Socrates confronts a paradox which purports to show that inquiry is fruitless: one can search neither for what one knows nor for what one does not know. Socrates offers an elaborate rebuttal, to the effect that learning is possible because all of us acquired knowledge in a past life, which we can recollect in this life. But he does not expect Meno to readily accept his theory of reincarnation and recollection, and concludes with this exhortation:

I do not insist that my argument is right in all other respects, but I would contend at all costs both in word and deed as far as I could that we will be better men, braver and less idle, if we believe that one must search for the things one does not know, rather than if we believe that it is not possible to find out what we do not know and that we must not look for it. (86bc)

Socrates acknowledges that he has not demonstrated the possibility of inquiry. He does not represent his arguments as being stronger than they are. He is not trying to trick anyone into thinking that inquiry is possible. Nonetheless, he exhorts Meno to believe that inquiry is possible. Furthermore, he seems to go beyond Pascal in thinking that it is possible to come to this belief by reflecting on its benefits. For recall that Pascal did not think that reflecting on the wager itself would induce belief in God—Pascal hoped only that it would induce the interlocutor to take whatever means were necessary to get herself to believe in God. Socrates, by contrast, seems to be committed to the possibility that the

\[2 \text{ Being and Nothingness 1.2.1.} \]
work of faith could be fully transparent: one believes for the sake of the relevant goal. He wants Meno to believe that inquiry is possible so as to become a better person.

Socrates grants that his belief in the possibility of inquiry is lacking in respect of proper evidence, argument or grounds. In the absence of such support, Socrates seems to think it is possible to sustain belief with one’s own internal resources. One contends at all costs—one fights—for the conclusion that inquiry is possible. This means not only believing that it is possible, but trying to come up with arguments that establish it, and when one fails, not giving up but looking for another argument. If Socrates and Meno are to believe that inquiry is possible, they must work to support this belief; whereas if they were to content themselves with believing, e.g., that if Socrates’ theory of recollection were correct, inquiry would be possible, they would not need to work for it. When one believes on the basis of faith, one’s belief can simply give out, without external interference, because one ceases to have the energy or will to sustain it. Socrates is enjoining faith in the possibility of learning.

If Socrates is right, self-deception is only one form that the project of directing one’s effort at believing (or feeling or being motivated to act) can take. He suggests that faith needn’t entail wishful thinking, because one can overreach one’s grounds without mistaking them for being better than they are. The faith he recommends is not only compatible with but entails acknowledged doubt, which is to say, an awareness that one believes (merely) on the basis of faith. Socrates differentiates the faithful person, who acknowledges that reality doesn’t give her the grounds to, as it were, effortlessly believe, from the self-deceiver, who must, first, shield her mind’s eye from the work she is putting into sustaining the belief or motivation or emotional state in question and who, second, once deceived, thinks the evidence available is all she needs. He contends that a person’s faith need not “fall back and collapse beneath her look”, or “be ruined from behind by her very consciousness” that she has faith.

In this paper, I want to offer two examples that seem to me to demonstrate the possibility of Socratic faith as against Pascalian calculation.

II. The Aspiring Philistine

Suppose you have a friend who doesn’t ‘get’ why people go to art museums, listen to classical music, read novels, or, for that matter, bother to drink from a cup instead of directly from the container. He has no taste for fine food or wine, and manages to eat relatively healthy and inexpensive food while putting a minimum of effort into the project. He has the occasional one-night stand, but no interest in a long term romantic relationship. He entertains himself with what you consider to be trashy TV and childish video game playing. He exercises moderately at the gym, but has no interest in sports or outdoors exploration. His undemanding job pays him enough to underwrite his lifestyle, and he is not inclined to try to advance his career. Since the person I have described is someone you consider a Philistine, I’ll call him “Phil”. Phil is not depressed, disaffected, or vicious: he takes his (minimal) work responsibilities seriously, he is loyal to his
friends, a devoted son, brother, uncle etc. He is honest and reasonable. It’s just that what he wants out of life strikes you as being paltry. You don’t doubt that he is content with what he has, but you think he could be so much happier than he is.

As a result, you make repeated attempts to acquaint him with the finer things in life. You take him to museums, national parks and fancy restaurants; you buy him a set of cups, you introduce him to potential romantic partners. Phil views your efforts with amusement and affection rather than with irritation. He takes them as expressions of love, rather than as meddlesome criticisms of his life or disrespectful usurpations of his autonomy. Nonetheless, he is unmoved. He finds the ballet boring and camping uncomfortable; he has no interest in marriage or child raising; he doesn’t see why one would pay so much money for food, given that rice and beans can be cooked cheaply and quickly. You get frustrated with him, and you say, “you are not even trying!”

What is it that you want from him? It was not enough for you that Phil accompany you to the ballet or Yellowstone; you feel he should’ve made a dedicated attempt to enjoy himself. When you arranged a date for him, you wanted him to actively open himself to the possibility of a relationship. When you took him to the fancy restaurant, you were hoping that he might put some work into shutting out thoughts about the cost of the meal, so as to give himself over to its sensual delights. You wanted him to use those cups a few times, even if it seemed silly at first, and see whether he might not come to prefer drinking that way. Of course it wouldn’t come easily or naturally to him to drink from a cup. You didn’t anticipate that he would find ballet or camping more fun than playing a video game. If he were such as to be immediately taken in by the delights of fine food or dating, he wouldn’t currently be where he is.

Phil seems, to you, to be expecting any valuable pursuit he might engage in to make its full value known to him immediately. You can see that all the great things in the world are not simply going to come to him. You are frustrated at his unwillingness to take even a tiny step forward in one of the many possible directions in which he could be branching out. What do these ‘steps’ amount to? What would he be after if he were to ‘make an effort’ to enjoy ballet or take pleasure in drinking from a cup? You are not asking him to do these things for you, or as a favor. You are acting for his sake, not your own. And yet his efforts could not be directed at what he already values, appreciates or enjoys. You do not want him to act for the sake of his own happiness—at least as he currently conceives it. For Phil’s problem, as you understand it, is that he is inclined to conceive of his own happiness in excessively narrow terms.

Could we say that you are asking him to take a chance or to countenance some risk? It is true that Phil anticipates a loss of some kind: boredom at the ballet; discomfort when his date learns of his apathy towards romance; the opportunity cost of an evening that could have been spent in pleasant TV watching or video gaming; the possibility of being injured while hiking. But what is the good for the sake of which he would be shouldering these risks? The ends of these activities—romantic fulfillment, aesthetic pleasure, or nature-appreciation—do not yet have, for him, the status of goods. And if you are asking him to take a risk that has, from his point of view, no prospect of a reward, then it seems
you are being totally unreasonable. You shouldn’t be frustrated with him, he should be frustrated with you!

It may be that you are being insufficiently patient, but I do not think you are necessarily being, or asking Phil to be, unreasonable. When you try to get Phil to broaden his horizons, you neither expect that he already has full access to the values for the sake of which he is acting, nor do you propose that he act for no reason at all. You are not so much asking him to take a risk, as asking him to have some faith. In what? First, in some domain of value: faith that there may be more to music, or dance, or romance, or gourmet food than currently meets (his) eye. Second, you are asking him to have faith in himself, that he can become the person who appreciates that value. You are asking him to reach beyond what he currently sees and appreciates in such a way as to become the person who appreciates things better, more fully. You are asking him to overreach his current grounds for belief and motivation in the manner characteristic of faith.

For the real problem is not that he sees absolutely nothing in romance, dance, civilized drinking—anymore than you see nothing of value in his TV watching and video game playing. You do not find it unintelligible that he spends hours engaging in these activities, as you would if he spent that time counting blades of grass or staring off into space. You can see that there is something to be said for the way he spends his time. You just think there is not much to be said for it, nor are you inclined to think that this judgment reflects an incomplete or inadequate engagement with video games on your part. You are not likely to try to peer beyond your current appreciation so as to try to come to appreciate them more. But that is exactly what you are asking him to do.

Presumably, your goal in exposing him to music and ballet and the outdoors was to hit on something that resonated with him to some degree. But that does not mean that you were expecting the initial experience to convert him, transforming him from someone who was, e.g., completely indifferent to ballet into a ballet aficionado. He is not likely, at first, to be overwhelmed by the benefits or pleasures of any of these domains. What you hoped was that, with respect to at least one of them, he not only saw some small glimmer of value, but also ventured to think that there might be more to see. Faith is required here precisely because if he were basing his reaction solely on the grasp he currently has of the value, it would not make sense for him to shoulder the costs or risks of engaging with it.

This kind of faith is distinctively aspirational: it is temporary, serving as a placeholder for the genuine grasp of the value towards which the person is working. Nonetheless, while it lasts, the person sees himself as overreaching the grasp of the value he currently has. If the demand you are making on Phil is rational, then you cannot be asking him to lie to himself to the effect that, e.g., ballet is more valuable than he takes it to be. Rather, you must be making the distinct demand that he believe it to be more valuable than he has grounds to, in order to learn its true value. The rationality of your demand presupposes that Phil has a path of rational, i.e. non-self-deceived, access to new values. But can we assume that this demand is rational?
Perhaps some committed skeptics will be willing to write Phil off as a lost cause: his only rational course is to remain as he is, though he can, through self-deception, trick himself into entry into a value domain. It may seem that sacrificing Phil’s ability to move forward rationally from where he is to a place with more values is not such a big bullet for the faith-skeptic to bite. It is a strange case, certainly, one where, perhaps, much has already gone wrong. In the next section, I examine a place where, I claim, aspirational faith is writ large—large enough that all of us have not only observed it, but experienced it as well.

III. Teen Magazines

A. Seventeen and the Birth of the Teen Magazine

Phil seems to have effected the transition from childhood to adulthood without acquiring many new tastes, hobbies, passions, etc., but for many of us this teenage period of transition is when some of our lifelong passions begin. In our teenage years we start reading big novels, performing music, seeking romance, caring about our appearance, looking towards the prospect of a career. The teenager is trying to determine for herself who she will be as an adult, and, not yet being an adult, she must engage in this activity without a complete grasp of the identity towards which she guides herself.

There is, now, an entire industry devoted to making movies, clothing and magazines for teenagers, but this was not true in the 1940s:

“And this was really a wilderness time, it was like discovering a whole new country. Because there was no awareness—not only of teenagers—but there was no awareness of teenage girls, there was no awareness of how they dressed, or the clothes they needed. There wasn’t even anyone producing clothes for this age group. There was no cosmetics being created for this age group. So it’s hard to believe it, but at that time, it was totally... new terrain. New territory, new country to be discovered."3

This is Estelle Ellis, describing her job as promotion director (1944–1950) of the newly minted Seventeen magazine, the first magazine marketed to teenagers. Ellis presided over an advertising campaign designed to market “the teenager” to businesses who might advertise in Seventeen. She did so in a series of advertisements describing a prototypical teenage girl she called “Teena.” The presentation of Teena in Ellis’ promotional materials has a tellingly paradoxical character. On the one hand, Teena is childish, weak, impressionable, a “copycat”:

(1) Teena the High School Girl has a peck of problems. She’s what older folds call an awkward adolescent—too tall, too plump, too shy—a little too much of a

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lot of little things. But they’re big things to Teena. And though she doesn’t always take her troubles to mother, Teena writes her favorite magazine for the tip-off on the clothes she wears, the food she eats, the lipstick she wields, the room she bunks in, the budget she keeps, the boy she has a crush on. *Seventeen* seems to have all the answers—that’s why like Teena, smart advertisers use *Seventeen*.

(2) Teena is a Copycat —what a break for you! Our girl Teena (unlike her older sister) wants to look, act and be just like the girl next door. She and her teen-mates speak the same language . . . wear the same clothes . . . eat the same foods . . . use the same brand of lipstick . . . go in for the same gimmicks . . . and lately even read the same magazine (*Seventeen*, of course!). For Teena and her teen-mates come in bunches—like bananas.

On the other hand, Teena is an influential leader in her household:

(3) Teena the High School girl is a power in the home. It doesn’t matter who in her family you’re out to sell, you can’t afford to overlook the tastes or preferences of our girl Teena. She’s the determining factor in many a family decision. It’s because of her that mother is re-doing the living room . . . that father is thinking seriously of added insurance, a new car, and a post-war home of their own. And you may be sure that when the buying is done Teena will influence style and brand choice. For Teena has a mind of her own. She’s not likely to be satisfied merely because it was good enough for mother. So if you’re out to sell Teena and her 700, 000 teen-mates, do it in the magazine they read and believe—*Seventeen*.

[Box 38, File 5]

(4) Bank on Teena—ge high school girl— to get her family to take a trip ... To persuade her father they need a new car ... To convince her mother they can’t live without new living-room furniture . . . To sell her teen-mates on the record, the blazer, the candy bar or lipstick she bought for herself. For our girl Teena has a way with her friends and her family. Persuasive ... persistent, she knows how to get what she wants. And you can make her want the product you sell if you tell her about it in the magazine she reads and believes—*Seventeen*.

(5) For our girl Teena won’t take no for an answer when she sees what she wants in *Seventeen*.

(6) Teen-age—that time in a lifetime when you run after the things you want! Teens need more because they do more . . . want more because they see more . . . get more because they have the stamina of youth. Their vitality can be industry’s

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4 cited in Massoni (ibid.), p.34.
5 cited in Massoni (ibid.), p.38.
6 cited in Massoni (ibid.), p.39.
7 cited in Massoni (ibid.), p.36.
inspiration—it inspired a vital magazine! *Seventeen*.

Notice that in (6) *Seventeen* is represented as beholden to and inspired by the teenager, who is, as it were, in the driver’s seat; and yet *Seventeen* is also the magazine she “reads and believes” because it “seems to have all the answers.” Is the campaign contradicting itself? Does the teenager lead, or is she led? *Seventeen* must go down as one of the great marketing successes in history, inspiring not only a slew of additional teen magazines, but doubtless playing some part in the youth culture explosion of the 1960s and 1970s. So let us suppose that Ellis was getting something deeply right in pairing descriptions of teen vulnerability with descriptions of teen power.

The contradictory condition of the teenager is not just that of being halfway on the road to adulthood. The teenager is aware of where she stands, and this self-awareness binds her weakness with her strength. Teena’s weakness in passage 1 is not her childishness but the way in which her acknowledged childishness moves her to strive for adulthood. For consider what it means not to know what clothing to wear, what food to eat, or how to decorate her room. She feels her own inadequacy in each of these domains, where but a few years earlier she would not have questioned her impulses. She is trying to eat, dress and decorate like someone she knows she is not yet. In the new domains that open themselves up to her—budgeting her money, wearing make-up, managing romance—she does not childishly defer to her mother. Nor does she simply strike out on her own. She is aware that she does not know, but wants to produce her own answers. In order to do so, she will have to strike forward in some direction without full confidence that she is doing what she should. Her vulnerability comes from the fact that she knows she does not (fully) know what she’s doing.

Teena’s weakness is the peculiar weakness of knowing that you are weak—this same weakness manifests as strength in 3-6. Her father listens to her because she is driven to become someone; she has the energy of someone who recognizes she cannot remain as she is; she has the persistence to get what she wants because her wants are not mere wants, but what she takes herself to need in order to become the person she is trying to be. The felt urgency of becoming someone explains why she “won’t take no for an answer.” Teena has the fervor, the energy, the stamina of the faithful.

My suggestion, then, is that the best way of explaining this marketing strategy—of explaining why Ellis adopted it, why businesses took to it, and why the descriptions of Teena, outdated as they are, continue to resonate with us—is that all of us recognize in Teena an aspirational form of faith. The fiction of Teena reveals a real fact about teendom. She does not strike us as a contradiction in terms. Instead, we find her peculiar combination of vulnerability and strength eminently intelligible. Teena sees that she does not have the resources to make adult decisions—for that, she would need to be the adult that she is, at the moment, only trying to be. She must, therefore, overreach what she

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8 cited in Massoni (ibid.), p.37.
9 “*Seventeen’s* first issue in 1944 sold 400,000 copies in two days. Within a year, it had a circulation of a million and soon carried more advertising than any other magazine.” p.267, *Huck’s Raft: A History of American Childhood* by Steven Mintz. Harvard University Press 2004.
already knows, desires, feels etc., in order to work her way into the point of view from which adult motivations, beliefs and emotions will make sense to her from within. Teena is not simply allowing herself to be carried along to adulthood; she takes an active hand in pulling herself there, even if that means sustaining with a kind of inner effort attitudes which, come adulthood, will be freestanding. We can explain the coherence of the ‘Teena’ marketing campaign by ascribing to the teenager an aspirational faith in the person she’s becoming.

But is this the only way of explaining it? Do we need to see Teena’s weakness and her strength as part of a unified condition of teenage faithfulness, or could we simply explain her condition by saying that she is, e.g., strong in relation to her family and weak in relation to her friends? My analysis requires us to credit Ellis with a deep insight into the peculiar, paradoxical unity of the teenager. Alternatively, we might understand the teenager as having a peculiar collection of weaknesses and strengths, dissolving the apparent paradox by separating the teen’s vulnerability from her power: she is weak in one way, or one domain, or in comparison with one group and strong in another.

I expect that some may be resistant to crediting a marketing campaign with deep insight into the human condition. I feel called upon to offer some further support for understanding the teenager as exemplifying aspirational faith.

B. Rookie and the Teenager’s Self-Knowledge

For isn’t it a bit strange to use teen fashion magazines to secure the conclusion that teenagers are rational in their aspirational activity? Such magazines are routinely criticized for retarding rather than supporting progress towards confident, independent adulthood. If such magazine undermine the self-esteem of young girls by foisting on them an unattainable bodily ideal, they promote irrationality rather than rationality. Note, however, that this criticism, if it is valid, seems to pick out a distinctively aspirational failure: such magazines are presenting girls with a false aspirational target, to the effect that what is essential to adulthood is a certain physical appearance. This is a problem only if the magazines, or at least the girls, are in the aspiration business in the first place.

Nonetheless, a skeptic might take the problems to be endemic: the “aspirational target” put forward by such a magazine is nothing other than an attempt to manipulate teenagers into molding themselves after some image that proves lucrative for advertisers. He will say, “it is not an accident that the campaign to end Photoshop in Seventeen was orchestrated by a fourteen year old10. Only a teenager would be naïve enough to believe that in the absence of Photoshop, such magazines would cease being harmful and manipulative.”

One might, however, agree that the problems run deeper than the use of Photoshop without thinking that the teen-magazine project as a whole is doomed to failure:

“I don’t know, however, that Photoshop makes a huge difference with the kind of models they use, or that there aren’t other parts of the magazine that contribute to the same issue… the effects of headlines under the “health” section about your back-to-school body are still there. It took me a little bit once middle school started to realize that if I didn’t read Seventeen, I didn’t feel obligated to watch what I eat.”

Those are the observations of Tavi Gevinson, who, at the age of 15, motivated in part by her frustration with magazines such as Seventeen, founded the online Teen magazine, Rookie. It will be instructive to consider the case of Rookie, as a magazine self-consciously opposed to the portrayal of the teen experience to be found in magazines such as Seventeen, Teen Vogue, Cosmo Girl etc. Rookie stays away from dieting tips and their advice/fashion columns speak to the reality of different body types. Much of the content of the site is produced by young women in their teens or early twenties; its ‘photo shoots’ are photographed styled and peopled by Rookie readers from around the world. Most striking of all is the detailed attention to the emotional life of the teenager—Rookie explores, through firsthand accounts, the way it feels to be in a variety of teen situations. In a New York Times article published in the early days of Rookie (9/2011), Gevinson declared: “Our content respects a kind of intelligence in the readers that right now a lot of writing about teenage girls doesn’t.”

As a Rookie reader¹², I can say that the bit of intelligence that Rookie specifically seems to me to respect is the teenager’s power of self-knowledge. Rookie takes teenagers to be in a better position to understand themselves than anyone around them might be. Which is not to say that they are in a particularly good position to understand themselves: Rookie manages to acknowledge the mysteries of the teen experience without thinking that they are to be decoded from the outside. Consider a representative excerpt, from an ‘editor’s letter’ in which Gevinson reacts to the looming end of the period of her life she calls “Forever”

Forever is the state, exclusive to those between the ages of 13 and 17, in which one feels both eternally invincible and permanently trapped. When my parents were young, Forever was expressed through promise rings, names carved into trees, and photographs you could hold in your hands. In the years since, Forever has inspired many phrases and ideas popular among adolescents: Best Friends Forever, Together Forever, Forever Young…. Nothing lasts forever, of course, but Nothing doesn’t resonate with a teenager the way Forever does, because, for better or worse, it’s hard to imagine ever not feeling this way, being this person, having this life. I waited my whole life for Forever. I started reading Seventeen at age seven and regarded my camp counselors, babysitters, older sisters, my sisters’ friends, and my dad’s high school students with more reverence and awe than I did any actual grownup. And really, truly? My Forever didn’t disappoint. It wasn’t perfect, but therein lies its perfection: I’ve been lucky to come up in a time when there are enough teen movies that make high school’s terribleness into something interesting at worst and beautiful at best, so even the darkest times were not lonely, but strangely magical.

John Hughes said that “one really key element of teendom” is that it “feels as good to feel bad as it does to feel good,” so really, I’ve had a solid run. Forever is not meant to be the best time of

¹² If I had a teenage daughter, or any daughter at all, I could chalk up my intimate familiarity with Rookie to conscientious parenting. As it stands, I must simply acknowledge that the teenager in me dies hard.
someone’s life, but it is certainly the most Forever-y. So I’m not sad because I think post-Forever seems terrible, I’m sad because Forever is remarkably peculiar, and I’ve really enjoyed trying to understand why, and I will miss it.

I’ve often worried that this ambition to understand my own teenage existence has lessened its sincerity, made my experiences too self-aware, but it’s been quite the opposite. Chris Kraus writes in I Love Dick, “The Ramones give ‘Needles & Pins’ the possibility of irony, but the irony doesn’t undercut the song’s emotion, it makes it stronger and more true.” The self-awareness or irony or whatever you want to call it made it easier for me to appreciate the awful parts of Forever because I had the rose tint of nostalgia in real time. It granted me a sense of humor about the most resentful of teachers. I was careful not to hang out in the alley behind school often enough to find it redundant and oppressive. I let myself write bad poetry and diary entries because I knew they’d at least be funny to look back on. Of course, the idea of a time when I’d ever be looking back was nebulous to the point of being unimaginable, because Forever, Always, Infinity, etc.

Gevinson describes an experience of inherent tension: a “Forever” with a foreseeable temporal bound. One knows that it cannot last, and yet one can hardly imagine oneself beyond it. One is invincible and at the same time at the mercy of “high school’s terribleness.” One wallows in the experience, because it feels “good to feel bad,” and yet one stands apart from it with humor and irony. Once again, the two sides—the power and the weakness, being free and being trapped, immersion and distance—seem to be two sides of a single coin. It is not that she is, in one way or at one time or in one place, free, and in some other way/time/place, trapped. Her freedom is the freedom of a certain strange kind of trap; and the trap is the trap of a certain strange kind of freedom. Gevinson is describing an experience that she acknowledges as difficult to understand; I propose that it is the very experience in which Ellis sought to interest would-be advertisers of Seventeen. The teenager’s peculiar brand of resoluteness is born of not knowing, and of plunging forward in the face of one’s ignorance. For the first time, she experiences the strictures of her life—neighborhood, school, family—as confining; and that very feeling of confinement testifies to her independence, her inner freedom. The difference between Gevinson and Ellis’s presentation of the paradox is that Gevinson appropriates it as the proper object of her own self-knowledge: “Forever is remarkably peculiar, and I’ve really enjoyed trying to understand why.” She suggests that, whatever good things are coming, they won’t contain a better opportunity to grasp Forever.

Forever is a crack in the human experience, between the time in which one relies on authorities to direct one to what is of value, and the time in which one responds directly to the values themselves. It is the time in which one learns, or begins to learn, to see for oneself what is out there to pursue. As one ceases to do things at the direction of one’s parents or teachers, one finds oneself with a dearth of reasons for action. One must, then, set out to discover what is worth doing, who it is worthwhile to become. Since it cannot be expected that these things will immediately appear as good as they will eventually be, one must act, think, and feel on the basis of little knowledge and much faith. The ‘innerness’ of the teenager indicates how much of her life she must sustain

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13 I don't know whether she's right about that. It's one thing to say that others cannot understand someone's Forever better than she herself; it is another thing to say that she cannot come to understand it better in retrospect.

14 [On a Sartrean picture, this is the first and only moment in which you see things as they are: there are no reasons, there is just will. Sartre's mistake is discounting faith.]
using her own resources, without the reassuring feedback that what she is doing has a point: she is a striver.

The experience advertised by Ellis and lived by Gevinson is the experience of becoming an agent. Because one must become more than one currently is, one cannot but overreach one’s current resources. The paradox of the teenager is her faith in the stable person she cannot get into view. Teenagers may, at times, be self-deceived—it may even be true that they are especially liable to self-deception—but it does not seem correct to say that self-deception undergirds the possibility of the contradictory state Gevinson describes. For one thing, the state Gevinson describes is hospitable to self-reflection, friendly to humor and open to the kind of self-irony that would tend to pierce the veil of self-deception.

Consider a specific example. In a later section of the letter cited above, Gevinson recounts some highlights of her Forever years, among which is this experience:

“I remember being in a play freshman year that brought an unexpected group of people together, prompting the, yes, Breakfast Club question of, Will we all still talk to each other in the halls on Monday? We didn’t really, but that turned out to be OK. We helped one another change, and then we moved on.”

Gevinson’s praeternatural mastery of the teen genre—the New York Times (July 2012, cited above) called her “the Oracle of Girl World”—suggests that she would not be naïve in her approach to the “Breakfast Club question.” She would know enough to recognize the classic teen experience of sudden closeness of accidental association preceding a lack of follow-through when circumstances no longer force the group together. And yet, she was neither too cynical to entertain the prospect of a permanent bond nor devastated when the group dissolved. Since we are not privy to Gevinson’s drama experience, let us explore it by way of the Breakfast Club.

In the movie, five teenagers from different social cliques (“a brain, an athlete, a basket case, a princess, and a criminal”) bond during enforced Saturday detention. Over the hours together, they discover a common humanity that transcends the social roles into which each had been previously slotted. Having made themselves vulnerable to one another, they ask themselves, in the movie’s climactic scene, whether they will remain friends Monday morning. Claire (“the princess”) answers in the negative, and is accused by Bender (“the criminal”) of being nothing more than what she initially seemed: “You just stick to the things that you know: shopping, nail polish, your father’s BMW…” Claire in turn, accuses Bender of being dishonest with himself: “I’m telling the truth.”

The eventual romantic resolution of this dispute—the two characters kiss—signals that the correct attitude to their future lies somewhere between those they expressed in their fight.

Claire is wrong to be so cynical: if she believes that their association was merely temporary or convenient, then what has happened between them is not real, and each character is truly trapped in their respective pigeonhole. But the confident conviction that the group will survive the weekend suggests the presence of an illusion that one has, in a
day, done the work needed to transcend years of internalized stereotyping. One needn’t have this self-deceptive thought—which is, in effect, the thought that one has concluded the process of change—in order to think that one is making progress. What the characters express in the scene in which they part from one another at the end of the movie—which comes before Monday morning—is a fragile, doubt-filled faith in their connection to one another. They have tasted enough of the value of true friendship to know that they have not plumbed its depths, and are therefore liable to ignore one another in the halls on Monday morning; their attitude towards the goods of friendship is not one of possession, but of aspiration. Lacking the grounds to conclude that they will greet one another, they can nonetheless have faith that they will do so.

The movie suggests that it is possible to see something in the prospect of true, stereotype-transcending friendship without taking oneself to have come to the bottom of that thought. What keeps aspirational faith honest is its provisional character, the aspirant’s acknowledged incompleteness, her recognition that she still has a long way to go. This kind of faith is Socratic because it faces up to ignorance as to what one has to gain. Socrates urges Meno to have aspirational faith in order to become a better, more knowledgeable person. When we act for the sake of knowledge we do not have, we cannot know what we are getting ourselves into—just as Phil cannot know that for the sake of which he places faith in drinking from cups, or ballet-attendance. This acknowledged ignorance is what distinguishes aspiration from self-deception. The self-deceived person must shield her eyes from the goal that drives her. Otherwise, as Sartre says, whatever attitude is the product of self-deception “collapses beneath my look.” The aspirant needn’t shield her eyes because she (knows that she) doesn’t know what her goal is.

Socrates sketches a way for faith to outstrip our current grounds for belief: instead of (self-deceptively) taking ourselves to know, we posit the object of faith as the target of our learning. Such faith can be cleareyed because someone’s self-understanding as a learner allows into view her ignorance of what she sets out to learn. Self-deception exists in order to cover up the fact that I am not the person I want to be; aspiration represents a different solution to that problem, namely that of trying to become that person. As Gevinson represents it, they changed and then they moved on—presumably, to change some more.

It is this special kind of motion—self-driven self-change—that Ellis’ advertising capitalizes on; that Gevinson’s magazine explores; and that Phil’s friends attempt to incite in him. In these aspirational cases, I have argued, agents overreach their grounds without deceiving themselves. Lend me end by asserting something stronger: cleareyed faith is possible only for aspirants. Believing on the basis of desire—as opposed to evidence or testimony or argument—is rational only if the desire in question is one we do not yet have, but are working to acquire.

With this (admittedly unargued for) thesis in hand, we can diagnose the problem with Pascal’s wager. The problem is that it is a wager. One can intelligently, reasonably wager only when one takes oneself to know what one stands to gain if one bets well, and
what one stands to lose if one bets badly. If you and I are going to bet about something, we begin by setting the stakes. Without stake-setting, there can be no betting; furthermore the stake-setting lies exclusively in the frame of the wager. Nothing that happens over the course of our bet can effect the stakes; and so, specifically, it cannot be that we expect our betting to reveal to us the value for the sake of which we bet. To the extent that a person takes herself to be ignorant of the risks and rewards associated with her options, she may be described as picking or choosing or willing or even throwing her lot in with a certain option, but she will not count as wagering. In framing his exhortation to believe in God as a wager, Pascal was ruling out the possibility that people could view their faith as an attempt to learn the value of religious experience. Wagering is an inherently non-aspirational activity, and that is why Pascal’s interlocutor is right to fear that she is being asked to lie to herself, and right to demand some truer path to God than the one Pascal offers her.