

Leah Becker

Evangelist

PHL 150-H

11 March 2011

### Please Place Your Bets

In his work, *The Wager*, Blaise Pascal attempts to convince his audience that the most logical course of action in life concerning one's own self-interest is to assume that God exists and to live according to his moral code. While Pascal's argument in favor of a religious and faithful life has survived several centuries, thus withstanding criticisms and objections over the years, there are still parts of his theory that remain open to opposition. For example, recognizing that in order for the wager to work one must hold the concept of a God that offers both benefits and punishments in the afterlife, even though these characteristics of God cannot be proven since they are unknowable, can destabilize the validity of Pascal's argument. In order to effectively analyze this inconsistency in Pascal's theory, however, the argument itself must first be outlined and considered. By first realizing that Pascal's target audience is the Libertine group, along with recognizing that Pascal is *not* attempting to prove the existence of God, but rather why individuals should believe in God, one can then begin to further understand the context behind the structure Pascal's argument. Then, by examining how Pascal proves both the positions of atheism and agnosticism as being contradictory, the central idea of the wager can be introduced and scrutinized. By then continuing to outline this wager as being a cost-benefit analysis and considering the possible objections and counterarguments that Pascal provides, his conclusion advocating for belief in God can be reached, and only then can his theories be further evaluated for additional inconsistencies. Through this process it can be clearly shown that while Pascal

develops an argument that effectively advocates for living a faithful and religious life, the downfall of his assessment lies in his argument only being plausible if one possesses a concept of God that offers both benefits to believers and punishments to non-believers.

Before dissecting Pascal's argument it is important to note what audience he is appealing to and exactly what he is arguing. First, it must be recognized that Pascal has constructed an argument aimed towards a growing group during the Enlightenment period known as the Libertines. The Libertines asserted that all beings are rational, and therefore should base their beliefs off of reason, rather than speculation. In this way the Libertines saw faith, or belief in God, as being foolish because the existence of such a being cannot be proven, and therefore defies rational reasoning. Due to this viewpoint all Libertines were atheists or agnostics, believing either that there was no god at all, or refusing to speculate about such an unknowable presence. Since the Libertines chose not to concern themselves with belief in God their code of morality was based purely on self-interest, pleasure seeking, and what makes one happy, or today what is titled hedonism. In order to reach this particular group Pascal has to level with them, or grant a concession to their objection against religion. Pascal's concession lies in admitting that his argument is *not* a proof for the existence of God, for he even says himself that it is not possible for humans to grasp the existence of something so far beyond their own comprehension. Pascal argues alongside the Libertines that God's existence cannot be proven through reason by opening his argument with the statement, "If there is a God, he is infinitely beyond our comprehension, since, being indivisible and without limits, he bears no relation to us" (66). By asserting that a being such as God is beyond human understanding Pascal agrees with the rational Libertines and concludes that "we are therefore incapable of knowing either

what he is or whether he is," further concurring with the Libertines' opinion that it is impossible to know concretely whether or not God truly exists.

Following this initial agreement Pascal then turns around and begins to *dissent* from the Libertines' position of atheism, further utilizing reason to show the atheist Libertines that they are wrong to assume that no God exists at all. Before Pascal can deliver the bulk of his argument in support of living in accordance with God's moral laws, he must first assess the position of the atheists as being contradictory. By writing his work as if it were a dialogue between himself and an opposing Libertine, Pascal is able to deliver both groups' positions in his writing. In response to the atheists' assumption that the lack of proof for God's existence equates to an abundance of proof that God does *not* exist, Pascal says that "Reason cannot make you choose either, reason cannot prove either right or wrong" (67). Pascal asserts that assuming God doesn't exist because there is no proof to the contrary is a fallacy, today called appeal to ignorance, or claiming that something is false because no one has proved it is true. In Pascal's case he shows the atheist the contradictory nature of his or her assertion, for the atheist cannot declare that God's existence is false based on a lack of proof to the contrary when he or she also lacks proof for their theory that no God exists at all. Through this line of reasoning Pascal shows the atheist that their position contradicts itself, and therefore forces them into recognizing that, rationally, they must take the position of an agnostic, simply claiming not to know the truth about God's existence.

Now that Pascal has proven atheism to be rationally inconsistent, he then goes on to prove the same for the agnostic, in turn, constructing his argument that one would be wisest to wager that God does exist and live according to God's moral laws. The first step in this development is to show the agnostic that by choosing not to make a decision as to whether or not God exists they actually are making a choice. The agnostic is under the impression that the

smartest option when faced with not being able to prove God's existence is to make no choice, stating, "although the one who calls heads and the other one are equally at fault, the fact is that they are both at fault: the right thing is not to wager at all" (67). Pascal counters this however, responding, "but you must wager. There is no choice, you are already committed" (67). To understand Pascal's reasoning the agnostics' lifestyle must be analyzed logically, for by claiming neutrality and ignorance when it comes to the existence of God the agnostic is actually living a life devoid of faith. Since in their neutrality the agnostic is not living in accordance with the morals of God there life is, in turn, Godless, and therefore they do not believe. In this way the "choice" Pascal is referring to is actually the lifestyle one lives, and thus there is no way to escape the decision that must be made.

Pascal then goes on to argue that since a choice must be made, for everyone has to live their lives with some belief behind their actions, the most rational choice is to live as though God exists. Here Pascal introduces his notion of "The Wager," making his argument out to be a gamble in order to appeal more strongly to the Libertines, who, along with drinking, possessed a hearty habit of gambling. Pascal asserts that the best bet in life is to live as though God does exist, for by living according to the morals of God "if you win you win everything, if you lose you lose nothing. Do not hesitate then: wager that he does exist" (67). Pascal is able to determine this as being the best option by using what is essentially a cost-benefit analysis: weighing the cost against the possible benefits in order to arrive at the best option. Pascal contends that if one lives his or her life according to God's laws there are two possible outcomes, the first being that if they are correct they will win an eternity of happiness in heaven and will avoid an eternity of pain in hell. The second option entails that they could be wrong, gaining no heaven, but also avoiding pain in hell, therefore losing nothing. Here, believing in God and

living by his laws has no downfall, for hell is avoided, heaven is possibly won, and there are no consequences if God turns out not to exist at all. There are also two outcomes if one does not live their life according to God's laws, the first being that if they are correct and God does not exist they will gain nothing, for no heaven or hell would be present if God was not present. However, if one lives their life as though God does not exist and they are wrong in their assumption they will suffer an eternity of pain in hell. In this case there are no gains, but one great loss, therefore entailing the exact opposite outcome in comparison to option number one. Pascal derives from this compare and contrast analysis the theory that the best wager is to live in accordance with the laws of God, for in this case there is the possibility of existing happily forever in heaven if one is correct, and there is no possibility of suffering in hell regardless of whether or not God exists.

Pascal introduces a possible opposition to his argument through the fictional agnostic who might contend that they are perhaps wagering too much, for they would be giving up a lifetime of pleasure in order to obey the moral laws of God. Pascal counters this opposition by informing the agnostic that when a *single* life of happiness on earth is weighed against *infinity* of happiness in heaven one should always choose the side that offers the possibility of infinity. Pascal explains that in wagering that God does exist, and then living in accordance with this wager "there is an infinity of infinitely happy life to be won, one chance of winning against a finite number of chances of losing, and what you are staking is finite. That leaves no choice; where there is infinity, and there are no infinite chances of losing against that of winning... you must give everything" (67). What Pascal essentially concludes is that infinity trumps the finite every time, for one finite lifetime of happiness is nothing compared to infinity of happiness, and therefore it goes against logical reason to wager as though God does not exist. In this way Pascal

logically proves to the Libertine audience that they must believe in God, for "since you are obliged to play, you must be renouncing reason if you hoard your life rather than risk it for infinite gain, just as likely to occur as a loss amounting to nothing" (67). In this way the only logical and self-interested option is to live life as though God exists in order to qualify for an eternity of happiness and pleasure in heaven.

While Pascal is able to counter the objection of losing a lifetime of self-interest and pleasure, another possible objection is that in order for his argument to function one must hold a specific concept of God: a God that offers benefits to believers and punishment to non-believers. Since Pascal admits that there is no proof that God exists it also cannot be proved that this possible God exists with the characteristics and mannerisms established by Pascal in his argument. Therefore, one cannot be sure that the concept of God Pascal references is real, and then further cannot be sure that the possible benefits and consequences that Pascal lays out are correct. This affects the argument because the outcomes of "the wager" are changed. For example, if the God in question exists as a God that only offers benefits to believers, but holds no consequences against non-believers, it would be possible for one to live their life the way they wanted, without worrying about the possibility of ending up in hell. In this way if one lives by God's moral code and God does exist they receive all the glories of heaven, but if they live outside of God's moral code and God still exists they suffer nothing while still being able to enjoy their lifetime of pleasure. While infinity still outweighs the finite in this scenario the fact that there are no consequences for non-believers, along with the possibility that God does not exist, makes the individual who lives *outside* of God's laws the more likely winner in a three to one bet. Pascal would be able to counter this, however, by the same means he countered the

opposition of wagering too much, for he asserts that infinity will always outweigh any finite number, therefore changing the three to *one* bet into a three versus *infinity* bet.

On the other hand, if the God in question only offers punishment for non-believers, but no benefits for those who do believe, it becomes more likely that one might take their chances living a happy life rather than never experiencing happiness at all. Since there is no chance of happiness after death, regardless of God's existence, it appears to be more rational to live a life of pleasure on earth against the risk that a wrathful God does exist and only offers the possibility of punishment. However, infinity yet again prevails over this objection, for infinite pain versus a finite life of happiness is not equal, as infinity and the finite can never stand equally. Thus, although Pascal's wager would appear to be flawed, since only the concept of a God who is both rewarding and wrathful serves the argument, by viewing the argument as the gamble Pascal constructs it to be the best decision when considering one's self-interest. Since infinite happiness is the most compatible option with a self-interested being, and infinite pain is highly incompatible, the best choice remains to wager as though God exists, for this is the only way to ensure a life safe from an eternity of pain.

By constructing his argument as a response to possible objections from the Libertines, Pascal ties up the loose ends and possible inconsistencies in his argument by honing in on the idea that the choice of whether or not to believe in God should be based on one's self-interest. It is through the steps of his argument, beginning with the appeal to the Libertine group, then illuminating the contradictory nature of the positions of atheism and agnosticism, and finally outlining his cost-benefit analysis, that Pascal establishes that the safest option when gambling with one's life and happiness is to wager that God does exist and to live one's life accordingly. While Pascal is unable to predict with absolute certainty what the characteristics of an

unknowable God might be, by weighing infinity against the finite he is able to support his theory as being the safest option in order to avoid hell at all costs. In this way Pascal would be able to counter the opposition that the wager is ineffective without knowing God's exact characteristics, by showing through simple reasoning that, when dealing with one's self-interest, it is best to play it safe and avoid any possible pain, an option which can only be achieved through believing and living as though God exists.



Works Cited

Pascal, Blaise. "The Wager." Trans. A. J. Krailsheimer. *Philosophical Horizons: Introductory Readings*. Comp. Steven M. Cahn and Maureen Eckert. Canada: Thompson Wadsworth, 2006. 66-68. Print.