

Philosophy Paper

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On Limits and Purpose in Pascal's Wager Argument

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1. INTRODUCTION

The French philosopher Blaise Pascal writes in *Pensées* (233end) that, in addition to simply living a life in accordance with religious rules, we should “lay before Him all you have for your own good and for His glory”. In the light of his argument for believing in God, which takes a rational analysis of the individual gain as its fundament, it is at least surprising that Pascal also claims that religion should be guided by commitment and faith felt by the heart only. In this paper the question whether there is a contradiction in Pascal's demand for commitment and faith on the one hand, and giving a rational argument for believing in God on the other will be addressed. In the second section a brief summary of the part of *Pensées* in which Pascal introduces his Wager-argument will be given and in the two sections that follow some aspects of especial interest will be analysed. In the fifth section, the problem will be restated with the help of the terminology so far introduced. Finally, in the sixth section, an attempt will be made to solve the problem by inspection of the terminology used and introduction of some nuanced distinctions.

2. SUMMARY

Pascal introduces his Wager argument in his memorable work *Pensées (Thoughts)*, first published in 1660 in French, which can be regarded a collection of thoughts with occasional intervention of an imaginary sceptic with whose objections Pascal deals. Before describing his Wager Argument Pascal, as a mathematician prone to analogies with number theory, considers the case of the infinite number, whose existence we assert from the evidently true proposition that the series of numbers thinkable is not limited. Nevertheless it is impossible to know whether this infinite number is odd or even.

Likewise, Pascal claims we could consistently claim that there is a God, assumed to have no limits, without knowing his nature. However, since God is, in addition to his being without limits, also without extension, we cannot know his existence either, because existence can only be judged upon within the realm of extension.

In response to the imaginary objector, who claims that the religious people's acceptance of God's existence is thereby not yet proven to be rational, Pascal exhibits his Wager argument, which consists in the claim that either we believe in God, or we do not believe in God, and either God exists, or God does not exist. Since no argument can provide compelling reasons for believing, in the rational sense, in God's existence, the choice is a bet. If we believe in God, then if he exists indeed, our merit will be eternal happiness, whereas if he does not exist, all we have lost is that which our religious convictions prohibited us to do in the course of our lives. However, if we do not believe in God, then if he exists, our punishment is great agony, and if he does not exist, then all we have won is a more convenient life without religious obligations.

	God exists.	God does not exist.
Believe in God.	$+\infty$	$L \pm x$
Do not believe in God.	$-\infty$	L

Pascal goes on to argue that the bet is in the Wager's interest, since his stake of some finite inconveniences x in our earthy lives can yield an infinite win. Also, answering his critic, Pascal argues that the bet is inescapable, because refusing to bet is to bet for the non-existence of God: "Yes; but you must wager. It is not optional. You are embarked." (233).

Finally, Pascal addresses the question how one can reach true faith once one feels rationally compelled to believe, by asserting that once one makes a serious effort to believe, true faith will follow naturally (233). Moreover, Pascal argues, the religious life is an ethically correct one; therefore one will be a gainer in this earthy life already.

3. ANALYSIS OF CONTEXT

Before proceeding, an analysis of the context in which this fragment occurs would be in place.

In the introductory note to his translation of the work *Pensées*, W.F. Totter argues that it can be regarded a defence of Pascal's ardent faith in the Jansenist doctrine, one of the variations in post-reformation Christian religion with which Pascal came into contact at an early age. During his lifetime Pascal saw this doctrine subjected to severe criticism and found heretical, and eventually measures were taken by the civil powers to destroy the movement. After writing a general defence of Jansenism against the heresy charges, Pascal embarked on writing "Apology for the Christian Religion in general" which would be only published after his death at the age of forty under the title "Pensées (Thoughts)". It can be regarded a consequence of the Enlightenment that, halfway the 17th century, many did not feel compelled to believe in an argument for God's existence based on a source other than reason. However, as explained before, Pascal asserts that such an argument cannot be given. Nevertheless especially the rigorous Jansenist doctrine called for a life of devotion, sacrificing many worldly pleasures and comforts for a God, whose existence is not apparent but by the Holy Scripture. The question was asked whether such a sacrifice on the basis of a great uncertainty is rational. It is evident that an argument defending the proposition that it is rational cannot be based on faith, because that is to what the argument is meant to lead. As will be elaborated later in this paper, this issue was what the Wager argument was meant to address.

Pascal's the very personal nature of Pascal's defence of Christianity is reflected in the following abstract at the end of the section on the Wager argument (233):

If this discourse pleases you and seems impressive, know that it is made by a man who has knelt, both before and after it, in prayer to that Being, infinite and without parts, before whom he lays all he has, for you also to lay before Him all you have for your own good and for His glory, that so strength may be given to lowliness.

Furthermore, the reader might ask what the act of "believing", in the context in which the concept of it has been introduced so far, would entail. First of all it should be mentioned that Pascal makes only sporadic use of the word "believing" itself, and instead refers in his description of the Wager argument to it as "wagering that God is" (233), or by the verb "to play". According to P.T. Landsberg in his article *Gambling on God* this

“wagering that God is” implies that “life is ordered on the assumption that God exists” (101). A similar phrasing can be found in Pascal’s original text, introducing the nuanced version “acting as if they believe.” It is exactly this apparently insignificant detail that will turn out of essential for the power of the argument. Of course the rational nature of the Wager argument calls for a clear-cut demarcation of believing in God that is not limited to the operations of the mind with respect to religious truths, but includes physical actions, which allow easy distinction between them being committed or not.

In contrast to this term Pascal also uses “faith” occasionally, which seems to be a term of narrower meaning, in the sense that it is not only acting as if one believes, but also commitment to religion that comes from the heart. Pascal writes (282): “This is then faith: God felt by the heart”.

Finally, some recurring elements show Pascal’s inclination towards *fideism*, the philosophical view that believing is intrinsically irrational, often paraphrased by *credo quia absurdum est* (I believe that, which is absurd).

4. OVERVIEW OF FIRST REFLECTIONS

Upon first investigation some qualities of the argument can be established. Firstly the nature of the argument will be discussed, secondly its implications, and finally several relevant assumptions of the argument will be addressed.

First of all it is noteworthy that the argument is rational and without basing itself on faith. Pascal’s approach to the question of believing in God or not is, by its very nature, identical to the approach to a game of betting to a tossed coin and equally mathematical. As has been established above, this rational approach, though unconventional and seemingly appropriate in the field of discussion, was the only tool Pascal had at hand that could possibly convince those who criticised religious behaviour.

Also, the argument takes self-interest as a starting point. Evidently no other criteria seem to play a role in the argument but sheer benefit for the human individual. This is remarkable since in the Christian tradition, it is especially the unconditional loyalty to God as the presumed father of all human beings that is put forward as an important argument for leading a religious life.

Secondly the implications of the argument will have to be inspected. The argument as presented does not prove or even make any predictions about the existence of God. This is to say that if the argument is supposed valid, this does not increase our knowledge related to the existence of God. The very reason the argument was presented is that, according to Pascal, the truth about God's existence cannot be known to mankind: "we know neither the existence nor the nature of God, because He has neither extension nor limits" (233), but nevertheless a choice ("a bet" (233) in Pascal's wording) will have to be made, for, "not to bet is to bet for the non-existence of God."

Thirdly some assumptions of the argument will be discussed.

Firstly it seems to presuppose that God will reward one's actions regardless of intentions that lie at their roots. This assumption follows from the rational nature of the argument, in the sense that it cannot pertain to mental activities, as argued before. This assumption is exposed easily by the modern reader, who might doubt whether God would appreciate those who order their life as if God exists, but perhaps do not have the mental motivation that the Christian doctrine actually asks for, and therefore whether He would really grant them eternal happiness. Nevertheless Pascal's argument's premises, and therefore also the truth of its conclusion, depend on this assumption.

Secondly it presumes that God is such as He is described in the Holy Scripture. There is no internal contradiction in asserting that if there would be an evil God, then evil actions would be rewarded and good actions punished. It is evident that, unless we assume that God is as in the Holy Scripture, Pascal's argument amounts to leading a religious life in accordance with every thinkable God, which is not feasible, taking into consideration the difficulties it would bring already to live a life in accordance with the existing religions, which encompass so far only Gods that are to a large extent alike.

5. PROBLEM STATEMENT

The problem that will be addressed in this paper is captured in the following question: Is Pascal contradicting himself in presenting an argument that is (1) purely rational and (2) takes self-interest as a starting-point to make the reader desire to believe in God, and on the other hand calling for faith that comes solely from the heart and is by its very nature not fueled by reason?

M. Sully Prudhomme has touched on this matter in attributing the predicate "brutal cynicism" to Pascal's Wager argument in his article *Le Sens et la Portée du Pari de Pascal*.

6. SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEM

The solution to this problem lies in a careful inspection of the terminology and reflection upon the very meaning of the concepts that are being used.

First of all, as should be evident from the discussion earlier on, ordering one's life as if God exists is distinct from having faith, and in some respect the two are opposites, as will be discussed later on. The latter follows naturally from the first (imparted by God, as will be discussed later on), as Pascal writes (233): "this [living a religious life] will naturally make you believe, and deaden your acuteness". According to Pascal, "those who seek God find Him" (242). At the very basis of religious faith, therefore, lies not reason, but the heart: "It is the heart which experiences God, not reason" (278). The two are opposite in the sense that Pascal writes in an often quoted phrase that "the heart has its reasons, which reason does not know of" (277). Therefore, the rational argument that Pascal has presented should not be viewed as the basis for faith. In fact, Pascal can be understood as arguing that reason has nothing to do with believing, which is in line with the fideist tradition that was mentioned earlier.

Secondly, Pascal distinguishes between different motives to believe in God (282):

[T]hose to whom God has imparted religion by intuition are very fortunate, and justly convinced. But to those who do not have it, we can give it only by reasoning, waiting for God to give them spiritual insight, without which faith is only human, and useless for salvation.

The last part corresponds to the way a believer "naturally" acquires faith.

Of course people who have religion by intuition, will not require a rational argument for their believing in God. However those "who do not have it" are first led by a rational argument of the kind of the Wager argument to lead a religious life, in order to then acquire faith naturally by the hand of God. It should be stressed that therefore ascribing to Pascal the assumption that God would grant salvation without taking one's motivation into account is hereby proven to be based on an incorrect observation.

The argument as a whole therefore provides a proper reason why someone, God has not imparted religion to, should endeavour to make the effort to become religious.

Therefore, Pascal argues that, though faith is not rational, the decision to pursue it is, and all that the argument is supposed to achieve, is to suspend disbelief and to "tame" one.

7. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Pascal's Wager argument is meant to take away obstructions for true faith, which cannot be acquired by reason alone. The argument will have to be rational, in order to be compelling and not circular, and it has to take self-interest as a starting point to make the argument rationally valid.

Reason is meant to lead one to take away the obstacles to true faith. Once those obstacles are removed, the real faith that is felt by the heart will follow naturally with the help of God.

Pascal's Wager argument is intended to provide this rational basis that could take away the obstacles to true faith.

Therefore, the answer to the question whether there is a contradiction in Pascal's approach of the subject should be answered by no.

As Pascal wrote, 'LA derniere démarche de la raison, c' est de connoistre qu' il y a une infinité de choses qui la surpassent.'

Works Cited

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Landsberg, P.T. "Gambling on God". *Mind, New Series* 80-317 (1971):100-104.

Prudhomme, M. Sally, "Le Sens et la Portee du Pari de Pascal". *Revue des deux mondes*, (1890). This old source has been used in this paper, because (1) often philosophers refer to this early but thorough commentary of Pascal's original work and (2) the wording of familiar objections that stem from the first analysis of the Wager Argument was historically first coined in this very article, such as "brutal cynicism".