

PASCAL'S WAGER

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Infinity. Nothingness. Our soul has been cast into the body, where it finds number, time and dimension. It reasons thereupon, and calls it nature, necessity, and can believe nothing else.

Unity added to infinity adds nothing to it, any more than does one foot added to infinite length. The finite is annihilated in presence of the infinite, and becomes pure nothingness. So does our mind before God; so does our justice before divine justice.

There is not so great a disproportion between human and divine justice as between unity and infinity.

The justice of God must be as vast as His mercy. But his justice done upon the reprobate is not so vast as, and should shock us less than, His mercy shown towards the elect.

We know that the infinite exists, but we are ignorant of its nature. Since we know it is false to say that number is finite, it must be true that there is infinity in number. But we do not know what it is. We cannot say that it is even, or that it is odd. Yet it is a number, and every number is either even or odd (this is certainly true of every finite number). So we may perfectly well know that God exists, without knowing what He is.

Is there not one substantial truth, seeing that there are so many things which are not truth itself?

We know then the existence and nature of the finite, because we too are finite and have extension. We know the existence of the infinite, but not its nature; for, like us, it has extension but no limits such as we have. But we know neither the existence nor the nature of God, because He has neither extension or limits.

But by faith we know His existence; in the light of glory we shall know His nature. I have already shown that there is nothing to prevent our knowing the existence of a thing, without knowing its nature.

Let us speak now according to natural lights.

If there is a God, He is infinitely incomprehensible, since, having neither parts nor limits, He has no affinity with us. We are incapable, therefore, of knowing either *what* He is or *if* He is. That being so, who will dare undertake to decide this question? Not we, who have no affinity with Him.

Who then can blame the Christians for not being able to give reasons for their belief, professing as they do a religion which they cannot explain by reason. They declare, when expounding to the world, that it is foolishness, *stultitiam*;¹ and then you complain that they do not prove it! If they proved it they would give the lie to their own worlds; it is in lacking proofs that they do not lack sense.

‘Yes, but while this is an excuse for those who offer it as such, and frees them from blame for not basing their beliefs upon reason, it does not excuse those who accept what they say.’

Let us examine this point of view and declare: ‘Either God exists, or He does not.’ To which view shall we incline? Reason cannot decide for us one way or the

¹1 Cor. i. 18

other: we are separated by an infinite gulf. At the extremity of this infinite distance a game is in progress, where either heads or tails may turn up. What will you wager? According to reason you cannot bet either way; according to reason you can defend neither proposition.

So do not attribute error to those who have made a choice; for you know nothing about it.

'No; I will not blame them for having made this choice, but for having made one at all; for since he who calls heads and he who calls tails are equally at fault, both are in the wrong. The right thing is not to wager at all.' Yes; but a bet must be laid. There is no option: you have joined the game. Which will you choose, then? Since a choice has to be made, let us see which is of least moment to you. You have two things to lose, the true and the good; and two things to wager, your reason and your will, your knowledge and your happiness; and your nature has two things to shun, error and unhappiness. Your reason suffers no more violence in choosing one rather than another, since you must of necessity make a choice. That is one point cleared up. But what about your happiness? Let us weigh the gain and the loss involved in wagering that God exists. Let us estimate these two probabilities; if you win, you win all; if you lose, you lose nothing. Wager then, without hesitation, that He does exist.

'That is all very fine. Yes, I must wager, but maybe I am wagering too much.'

Let us see. Since there is an equal risk of winning and of losing, if you had only two lives to win you might still wager; but if there were three lives to win, you would still have to play (since you are under the necessity of playing); and being thus obliged to play, you would be imprudent not to risk your life to win three in a game where there is an equal chance of winning and losing. But there is an eternity of life and happiness. That being so, if there were an infinity of chances of which only one was in your favour, you would still do right to stake one to win two, and you would act unwisely in refusing to play one life against three, in a game where you had only one chance out of an infinite number, if there were an infinity of an infinitely happy life to win. But here there is an infinity of infinitely happy life to win, one chance of winning against a finite number of chances of losing, and what you stake is finite. That removes all doubt as to choice; wherever the infinite is, and there is not an infinity of chances of loss against the chance of winning, there are no two ways about it, all must be given. And so, when a man is obliged to play, he must renounce reason to preserve his life, rather than risk it for infinite gain which is just as likely to occur as loss of nothing.

For it is no use alleging the uncertainty of winning and the certainty of risk, or to say that the infinite distance between the certainty of what one risks and the uncertainty of what one will win equals that between the finite good, which one certainly risks, and the infinite, which is uncertain. That is not so; every player risks a certainty to win an uncertainty, and yet he risks a finite certainty to win a finite uncertainty, without offending reason. There is no infinite distance between the certainty risked and the uncertainty of the gain; it is not true. There is, indeed, infinity between the certainty of winning and the certainty of losing, but the uncertainty of winning is proportionate to the certainty of what is risked, according to the proportion of the chances of gain and loss. Hence, if there are many risks on one side as on the other, the right course is to play even; and then the certainty of the risk is equal to the uncertainty of the gain, so far are they from being infinitely distant. Thus our proposition is of infinite force,

when there is the infinite at stake in a game where there are equal chances of winning and losing, but the infinite to gain. This is conclusive, and if men are capable of truth at all, there it is.

‘I agree, I admit it; but is there no way of getting a look behind the scenes?’ Yes, Scripture and the rest, etc.

‘Quite; but my hand are tied and my mouth is gagged; I am forced to wager, and am not free; no one frees me from these bonds, and I am so made that I cannot believe. What then do you wish me to do?’

That is true. But understand at least that your ability to believe is the result of your passions; for, although reason inclines you to believe, you cannot do so. Try therefore to convince yourself, not by piling up proofs of God, but by subduing your passions. You desire to attain faith, but do not know the way. You would like to cure yourself of unbelief, and you ask for remedies. Learn of those who were bound and gagged like you, and who now stake all they possess. They are men who know the road you desire to follow, and who have been cured of a sickness of which you desire to be cured. Follow the way by which they set out, acting as if they already believed, taking holy water, having masses said, etc. Even this will naturally cause you to believe and bunt your cleverness.

‘But that is what I fear.’ Why? What have you to lose?

But to show that such practices lead you to belief, it is those things which will curtail your passions which are your main obstacles.

End of this discourse. Now, to what harm will you come by making this choice? You will be faithful, honest, humble, grateful, generous, a sincere friend, truthful. Certainly you will not enjoy these pernicious delights—glory and luxury; but will you not experience others?

I tell you, you will thereby profit in this life; and at every step you take along this road you will see so great an assurance of gain, and so little in what you risk, that you will come to recognize your stake to have been laid for something certain, infinite, which has cost you nothing.

‘Oh, your discourse delights me, carries me away!’

If it pleases you and appears convincing, know it has been uttered by a man who has knelt, both before and after its delivery, in prayer to that Being, infinite and without parts, before whom he submits all that is his, begging Him to subject to Himself all that is yours, for your own good and for His glory; and thus strength is made consistent with lowliness.

From: Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* (trans. John Warrington), London: Dent (Everyman’s Library No. 874) 1932.