Pascal, the Wager, and the Background

1.1 A Crisis of Knowledge and a Good Bet

Blaise Pascal believed that one ought to wager one’s life on the truth of the proposition that God exists; he believed, that is, that the existence of God is a good bet and that one ought to organize one’s life around it and to act at all times as if God existed. He believed that what one risked in such a bet is trifling and that the outcome, if one were right, would be infinitely good.

Pascal’s claim is clearly, from some perspectives, outrageous. It must seem outrageous to many believers that anyone would offer betting odds not only on the existence of the deity but on God’s behavior as well. It must seem outrageous to others that God would care whether or not one wagered on his existence or would be positively influenced by the fact that one did.

Philosophers are, however, as likely to be disturbed as orthodox believers. Usually, one might think, a rational bet is one based on certain sound information; for example, a horse-racing enthusiast knows that Watering Trough runs well in the mile and a quarter, prefers fast tracks, likes to pull away from a big field, and (most importantly) has been winning a lot lately. But what does Pascal know of God’s track record? Does he not say, himself, that God is hidden? How could one ever really know that one had won the bet? Plymouth Brethren finding themselves in the Moslem seventh heaven, filled with good things (even almond-eyed houris), might well think they had been co-opted by the devil, while devout Moslems who took the Koran literally and found themselves in the midst of solemn Plymouth Brethren, eternally singing hymns, might well think that they had been consigned to hell. What kind of knowledge does Pascal need, and can he possibly get it?

Even if Pascal could answer the epistemologist, would he not then face the skepticism of the moral philosopher and the philosopher of religion? Is there not a sense of a cleverly managed program of self-interest in Pascal’s proposal? Would not many traditional elements of the supposed relation between moral theory and natural theology be hopelessly muddled if it should turn out simply
to be good business to believe in God? Indeed, could any being in whom it is
good business to believe actually be God?

I address all of these questions in due course, but briefly, my task is, first, to
put forward the argument that Pascal is best understood in the context of a
crisis of thought, especially in the varieties of neo-Platonism and Platonized
Augustinianism of Port-Royal and elsewhere. This crisis of thought was deepened
by the fact that scientific knowledge seemingly made it difficult to find not only
God but also human beings in physical nature. The nature of the human being
was becoming more obscure even as the nature of physical reality was becoming
clearer. Thus grounds developed for a quite new kind of skepticism. The bet is
a way of providing a rational response to a specific mixture of knowledge and
ignorance.

Second, I argue that it was important to Pascal that his bet be a “good” one in
three basic senses of good. A bet is “good” in the most common sense if the
probability of winning and the excellence of the outcome are such that the chances
of winning justify the risk. Pascal thinks this is the case about wagers on the
existence of God, chiefly because he believes that the rewards to the believer will
infinitely outweigh the costs and inconveniences of the bet. (We must constantly
remember that one makes one’s bet in this case not by putting one’s money down
at the two-dollar window but by acting as if God exists.)

But a wager would be better still if making it also increased the chances of
winning. This commonly happens; for example, if a certain amount of capital is
needed to create a working gold mine, then, up to the point at which the capital
is attained, everyone who bets by investing in the mine helps create the desired
result. In the Christian and other theistic traditions, it has always been a paradox
for believers that a good God and a bad world coexist. Indeed, in the Christian
tradition, God came among us, but he went unrecognized by most people and
was crucified. He is, Pascal insists, hidden. If we had behaved as if God existed,
God would not have been crucified. If, therefore, he still exists but is in hiding,
it would seem to follow that behaving as if he existed would render it more likely
that he will, in fact, be manifest. That this is so follows in Pascal’s mind from
the fact that because the human being is God’s creation, God and humanity go
naturally together and have become unnaturally separated. If the separation is
anyone’s fault, it must be ours, because God, by definition, is without fault.
Therefore, correcting human faults will bring human beings closer to their natural
states.

Finally, any action, including any wager, will be a good one, in principle, if
the goodness of the world will in fact be improved by making it and if making
it does not constitute in and of itself an immoral act. Pascal thinks that behaving
as if God exists will make this a better world. And behaving as if God exists is
a way of behaving well, not an immoral act. He believes that this is so because
one who accepts the existence of God will have to treat all people as if they were
saved. It is this last claim—the claim that the bet is intrinsically morally good
and thus consequentially good for everyone—that I take to be most important.

1.2 Understanding Pascal in the Light of the Three Orders

My second task is to argue that this interpretation makes sense of and ultimately
depends upon Pascal’s doctrine that the “three orders”—essentially the intellectual
order, the moral order, and the physical order—are inseparably intertwined. I
believe that this interconnection is central to Pascal’s whole philosophy. The
doctrine of the three orders provides a way of reconciling the Platonic and neo-
Platonic world views with the outlook of the new sciences. Pascal believed that
this reconciliation is the key to the problem. He was gripped, even more directly
than Descartes, by the new sciences. Yet, far more strongly than Descartes
and even more strongly than Malebranche after him, he saw the difficulties in
reconciling the different sorts of truth.

His own life was punctuated occasionally by personal moral doubts (should he
have dragged his feet when his sister wanted to take much of their joint patrimony
with her to Port-Royal?) and animated by clear moral battles with the established
order—or at any rate with that part of it whose outlook he took to be expressed
by the Jesuits of his time. He saw the human condition as precarious, and he was
struck even more by the fact that, despite his mathematical powers and his
scientific understanding, he was very far from having a rational answer to the
great questions of theology. Despite some claims to the contrary, he did not
despise such rational answers. He says that God does not mean us to believe
without reasons. The doctrine of the three orders provides a solution that allows
us to admit human frailty while framing at least a kind of answer for human
doubters.

Finally, I argue that there is, given all that we know at present, a measure
of plausibility to Pascal’s arguments. Given certain conceptual choices, not
themselves inherently unreasonable, one might well respond as Pascal did. I
argue that there are real choices. If one examines closely the options open to a
skeptic who challenges Pascal, one sees that Pascal has substantial reasons for
thinking that for skeptics, too, a wager is in order—even if it is not quite the one
envisaged.

The best reason to be interested in Pascal’s wager is, surely, that once one
understands what is at issue there is something to be said for it—that it helps us
to see the options that a reasonable human being ought to consider. But another
reason is that there remains a natural interest in an issue about which much ink
has been spilt without anyone’s having come up with an account that seems quite
worthy of a man of Pascal’s intellect and sensitivity. Pascal lived only thirty-nine
years (from 1623 to 1662), in the course of which he created a good part of probability theory, invented and built a digital calculator, made important advances in differential calculus, created the first Paris bus service, and fought a long-running battle with the Jesuit order, which sometimes forced him into hiding. His friends, who included the men and women who made Port-Royal, for a few years, the storm center of French intellectual and religious life, were desolated at his death. Some of them, at least, evidently believed the fragments of Pensées he left held, if they could but be put in their right order, the prospect of a serious Christian apologetic.

It must be admitted that overall, whether he was investigating the theory of the vacuum or exploring the moral codes he took to be recommended by the Jesuits, he never seemed to be foolish. He could be unfair—he often was to the Jesuits—but he almost always seems to combine a gift for logical analysis with strong moral conviction. He could also be obsessive, as the same documents suggest. Furthermore, he seemed to feel himself burdened by some great weight—a weight strangely attached to all human beings even though, he said, a human being is only a “thinking reed.” The obsessions and the sense of burden—the word fear (peur) occurs sixteen times in the Pensées—may make us wonder whether Pascal’s mind was not precariously balanced, but those who face up to the apparent realities of the world must often know the meaning of these emotions.

The investigation seems worth continuing, therefore, until we are convinced that we understand the wager.

1.3 Pascal and Self-Interest

In the recent tradition of English-speaking analytic philosophy, it has been most common to see the wager as one tied to the calculation of self-interest. And this does seem to be what one finds on the surface of the fragment. In these terms, some writers have derived two or even three different arguments from Pascal’s formulation. Ian Hacking finds three: one is simply that if God exists, he will save the believers and damn the unbelievers. This argument depends on the dominance of God if he exists at all. We may not know for certain that the existence of God is even possible, yet if, as Pascal thinks, the cost to the believer is not too great, belief is reasonable. This argument does not depend on any particular view about the probability of the existence of God. The second argument is that the existence and nonexistence of God are equiprobable and that, therefore, belief is clearly the best bet if, in fact, there are only two options. The third argument Hacking postulates is that the existence of God is at least possible, and therefore it has some finite probability. This version gives, perhaps, less ground for belief than the second but somewhat more than the first.

Peter C. Dalton argues in somewhat the same vein in two articles. He, too,
claims that in Pascal’s text there is one argument that contains no specific claim about the probability that God exists and one in which the probability is one-half. Hacking thinks that Pascal has hold of something useful, but that the difficulty is that the alternatives are not exhaustive. There might be many different sorts of possible beings and many different sorts of theological policies to bet on. Dalton also argues that the probability that God exists cannot be known to be one-half, but he claims that the argument that does not depend on specific probabilities is unsound, because Christianity, on Pascal’s account, ought to be judged so unfathomable that the believer does not know what he is betting on.

I shall raise questions about rationality, practical reason, probability, and the kind of knowledge that we might have of the existence of God and of the structure of Christianity. But I doubt that these formulations, in any case, capture much of what interested Pascal. The self-interest of the believer is put forward as being the believer’s own interest in being personally saved or damned, and the argument is made out to be one to the effect that God is more likely to save those who believe than to save those who refuse to believe. God, that is, is thought to be disturbed by the lack of belief and to be generally vengeful.

Indeed, P. T. Landsberg specifically claims that the whole argument depends on the belief in God’s vengefulness, and certainly the self-interest in believing a version of the argument would seem to lead in that direction. But if so, the argument could be disposed of very quickly. Terence Penelhum argues cogently that the vengeance policy ascribed to God is surely immoral. If so, then belief in God furthers this immorality and would amount, itself, to an immoral activity.

Nicholas Rescher in an extended study notices that the underlying issues have to do with hope and trust and that the question to be assessed is the effect, overall, of that hope and trust on the whole situation; but he also paints the question, generally, as one of rational self-interest. The essence of the matter, says Rescher, is given in “one assumption kept constant throughout—the view of the human being as prudently self-preoccupied, proceeding with a calculating view to rational self-interest.” He admits, in the same passage, that “this is doubtless not the noblest and most elevated sort of religious faith.”

It is important, however, not to misunderstand Rescher. It does not follow from this that moral and properly religious considerations have no place in the “calculations.” Suppose that one values morality above all else. Rescher’s account simply suggests that one would be prudent to act in such a way, in that case, as to make morality as likely as possible. Again, if one thinks that the furtherance of religious practice and belief is most important, one will try to act so as to make religious practice and belief as likely as possible. What is at issue is one’s reason (or reasons) for doing these things.

Immanuel Kant also supposed that practical reason must be employed to prove the existence of God, but he believed that it would be immoral to argue in the
way that Rescher ascribes to Pascal. Morality requires not just that one act morally but that one act morally because it is good or right to act morally and not because there is some advantage in it. Kant’s version of the “practical argument” has no undisputed reading either, but a plausible version that helps to make the point here goes as follows: The existence of God is a necessary postulate of pure practical reason, essentially because the existence of duty implies the *summum bonum* in its guise as the *bonum consummatum* (the good as an actual perfection). This, in turn, requires the reconciliation of happiness (a species of self-interest on the usual views) and duty, because one’s right to happiness is, on the face of it, as fundamental as one’s commitment to duty. Indeed, it is because these two are sometimes in apparent conflict that the problem of morality arises in a serious way. If that reconciliation of self-interest (or happiness) and duty could not be guaranteed, we would have a duty to bring about what we cannot bring about, namely the *summum bonum*. And to have a duty to do what one cannot involves a contradiction or at least a meaningless proposal. What is one to do? What one is furthering in seeking the resolution is not self-interest but the *summum bonum* as the *bonum consummatum*. 17

Rescher’s reply to Kant is that Pascal’s version of the bet is not immoral because it is not *worldly* self-interest that is at issue. 18 Rather, what is involved is a kind of eternal and universal interest, which, partly because it is associated with God and God’s will, is no longer “crass.” It is immune, thus, to the Kantian objection that one should not pursue self-interest for its own sake. What is being pursued is part of what is needed for the *bonum consummatum*.

Rescher also has answers to many of the claims that this kind of argument, even if it were Pascal’s, would simply be invalid. It has often been claimed that Pascal has not defined the alternatives clearly, that he has not taken account of various non-Christian beliefs, and that he certainly, therefore, does not give his reader an exhaustive set of options. It is even true, Rescher says, that one in the state of mind produced by Pascal’s argument would not seem very worthy of salvation. But a *practical* argument is always aimed at giving someone in some particular situation a reason for doing something or other. Hence, he says, the fact that Pascal does not consider various rival polytheistic views and so forth is not an issue. 19 Rescher thinks that the persons to whom the argument is directed must be “those nominal Christians, whose name is legion, who do indeed espouse the god-conception on which the argument is premised.” 20 As for the claim that believers in Pascal’s argument would be unfit for salvation, Rescher answers that betting on God’s existence does not guarantee salvation, but it opens the way to a further development.

Rescher is not very interested in the historical questions about what Pascal really meant. He begins by saying that his is “emphatically not an exercise in Pascal scholarship or exegesis.” 21 But he does attack Jules Lachelier for being
ahistorical in overstating Pascal’s use of the idea that one must renounce self-interest. Lachelier argues that Pascal equates salvation with renouncing self-interest and renunciation of self-interest with admission of the existence of God. Rescher says that this argument “just is not Pascal’s.”

The problem with Rescher’s account, however, is that his reading does not bring out the issues that are philosophically most interesting and does not place Pascal in his own context. In Rescher’s view, the argument is addressed only to people in a certain frame of mind. But these “nominal Christians” of whom Rescher speaks, although of interest to historians and sociologists of religion, are of no special philosophical interest.

We must ask, anyhow, what *Pascal* actually would have to say about readings such as Rescher’s. In so far as Rescher’s argument is based on the notion that a real self-interest properly belongs to those in certain states of mind that would be advanced by belief, Pascal’s verdict would be scathing and would force one to give up any such reading as being his own. Pascal insists that self-love is the beginning of all disorder and also that it is contrary to justice. It is the essence of concupiscence (understood as the strong desire for worldly things and not, as is sometimes the case, merely as sexual desire), and it belongs to the second human nature, which emerges only after the Fall.

There is not a *real* self-interest, for this “self” is, after all, literally nothing. As much as Cardinal Béruelle, Pascal believed that the human being, as such, is nothing and that we become something only in relation to God. Rescher, certainly, concedes that self-interest must, based on Pascal’s view, be transformed into some divine interest. But the wager must link the present human being with humanity as it ought to be. It is human beings here and now who make the wager. And it is not in their interest (as corrupt beings) to do so. The wager must, however, motivate them, not the transformed beings, and therefore the argument must be conceived, I believe, in some other way.

It is easy enough to understand how Rescher’s interpretation gets started, because bets are normally made by rational beings in their own self-interest. And there has to be some element of *ordinary* betting involved, first, because Pascal himself was no doubt a betting man and, second, because he would not have wanted to mislead his readers by using language that set them on a wrong course. The Rescher argument, if it cannot be wholly right, cannot be altogether wrong, either.

A solution to this difficulty—and to much else—is in Pascal’s account of the three orders. There is an order of the body, the physical realm; an order of the mind, the intellectual realm; and an order of charity, the moral realm. Rational arguments may appeal to the situation in any order, but a genuine philosophical argument ought to appeal to the just proportion between them. The difficulty is to find this just proportion. Arguments that appeal to our bodily states may, for
instance, be legitimate arguments based on our need to respond to hunger or fatigue. Arguments that appeal to our minds or intellects may well, of course, appeal to our rational, intellectual self-interest. The wager, in the first instance, obviously does both, but it is meant to lead us to see that we need to appeal to our charitable instincts—to something that comes, Pascal thinks, from the supernatural.

How might this be so? The wager, in fact, forces one to the central question: What should I do with my life? In terms of the three orders, there would seem to be different answers. I can commit myself to some attempt to achieve the well-being of my body. By sticking strictly to the terms of one's awareness of one's body, one commits oneself to a life of pleasure and of avoidance of pain. In what are now common philosophical terms, this is the answer of the hedonistic utilitarian. In seventeenth-century language (which sounds more pejorative), this was often imagined to be the life of the libertine, a name usually assigned to skeptics but that had overtones suggesting one who believed whatever he or she wanted to believe. A carefully controlled version of such a life, the life of the Stoic, was certainly one of the options known to Pascal and his friends.

Second, I can devote my life to the well-being of the mind. That is to say, I can do what reason commends when reason is harnessed to the attempts of the intellect to consider my well being, for at this point it is still, literally, "my" well being.

Third, I can appeal to the order of charity. When Pascal uses the famous phrase "the heart has its reasons," he is talking about the order of charity. This order is primarily the moral realm, although it may well, also, be the set of reasons based on "insight" that gives one a clue about reality. Basically, though, the French charité, from the Latin caritas, has to do with caring, and caring for others is Pascal's notion of morality. One who does this is, as we sometimes say, one who has a heart. Once we have seen how the wager forces the question of morality on us, we can see, easily enough, how the wager argument goes and why Pascal talks about the choice between infinity and nothing. The body, taken by itself, is doomed (i.e., without reference to the possibility that God may exist and may resurrect it, it has no hope at all). Bodily pleasures are momentary and we all die. Thus the body's only hope is in a resurrection. In anticipating Matthew Arnold (himself a close student of seventeenth-century thought), this becomes, in any case, a moral matter. The resurrection is about the claim that goodness, itself, cannot be destroyed. If we are to be resurrected, Pascal would say, it can be only because goodness demands it. And this takes us beyond the moral order. And what of the life of the intellect? The reasons of the heart, he says, are unknown to the intellect. But that is because the intellect, in this sense, is committed to its function as my intellect. In any case, "reason can be made to serve any purpose."
Reason cannot make the necessary decisions, because it sets up antinomies and contradictions if it is understood as something that provides the moral truth. But if it is understood as pointing beyond itself, as showing us that we need an objective goal in life that cannot be supplied simply by reason, then it can be seen as having a moral dimension. But to what does it point? Presumably, it points to what is not limited in the way that reason is. But everything in this world is limited either because it is a defined physical entity or because it cannot be an end in itself. Because the argument leads beyond itself, there is clearly a difficulty. It is not now my life in the original sense that is at issue, for we have passed that. It is, as it were, my life seen as a facet of the infinite. Self-interest is therefore in some measure bypassed. The obvious difficulty if one presses the matter this far is that we cannot now really talk, as Rescher does, in terms of rational self-interest at all. But the argument proceeds by an appeal to self-interest that then bypasses self-interest. Does it then destroy itself?

If one still has any doubts, consider that the whole thrust of the Lettres Provinciales, mostly devoted to Pascal’s attack on the Jesuit Order, was against this kind of religion of calculated self-interest. But we are not yet quite through with this line of interpretation.

1.4 Contre les libertins?

It has been suggested, of course, that the wager is intended only for libertines, essentially for those who are already skeptics who feel free to disbelieve what they please. Such an argument is appropriate for them, especially if being free to disbelieve what one pleases implies the freedom to believe what one pleases. (If there are no constraints on belief, or if one can really disbelieve freely, one should be able to believe freely as well.) Such suggestions come from philosophers as eminent as Léon Brunschvicg and Jacques Chevalier. Chevalier emphasizes the moral overtones of the term libertin. He associates skeptics with joueurs, gamblers. The views of libertines were not originally based on self-interest but on the notion—the fact they might rather have said—that nothing ultimately compels one to most of the beliefs that philosophers and ordinary citizens have taken to be necessary.

In these circumstances, the wager might be taken to urge restoration of the belief in the existence of God on the ground that even one who is wholly able to believe anything that he or she pleases would find that the rewards for a winning bet still infinitely outweigh the displeasure that may result from carrying out the believing program. There are obvious objections to this reading, not least that what Pascal had in mind was not simply intellectual belief (whatever that might be) but a passionate commitment to treat others as if they were saved. Still, the libertines, or at least the Pyrrhonists, as he in fact preferred to call them, played
an important role in Pascal’s thinking and have almost the last word in this monograph. It would be hard, indeed, to overestimate their role.

Pascal begins one fragment with the words “Pyrrhonism is true.” This quotation, which Terence Penelhum places at the head of a chapter on Pascal, led him to conclude that Pascal was a skeptical fideist. But in another place, Pascal says that “nature confounds the Pyrrhonist.” The claim that Pyrrhonism is true is merely the assertion that, before Jesus, philosophers got their religion wrong; and the claim that Pyrrhonism is confounded has to do both with our tendency to believe and with the availability of scientific accounts of nature. Yet Pascal says, in the same passage, that the “dogmatist” is confounded by reason, which always presents us with alternatives. Pascal believes, that is, that we know enough to bet and not enough to be sure, and so, as he claims, what he proposes is to provide a religious apologetic addressed to the human condition, and there is probably, as Per Lønning argues, good reason to believe him.

Henri Gouhier considers the possibility that the “mathematical libertine” is being addressed by the wager, but he is cautious. He suggests that the wager is a link between the parts of the *Pensees* that address the human condition and the parts that address the need for religious belief.

Although the “message for the libertines” doctrine is advanced by both Brunschvicg and Chevalier, neither is able to believe that Pascal was as crass as the self-interest argument seems to suppose. One way of reconciling these views would be to hold that the argument is simply directed to the spurious or apparent self of the libertine and that its soundness (though not, of course, its formal validity) is, indeed, destroyed as soon as all possible premises about the reality and importance of self-interest are seen to be false. The libertine, after all, does have a problem. A freethinker is committed to no ultimate metaphysical beliefs about the self and yet claims either to be able to doubt (i.e., to indulge in a rational mental activity that extends over time) or to be able to withhold beliefs (a practice that requires enough knowledge to be able to tell when one is believing or not). There is a sense, therefore, in which the libertine, or any skeptic, makes do with a kind of illusion of the continuing self accepted for purposes of argument without any ultimate commitment.

But Pascal does not approach the libertine or the skeptic (if there is a difference between them) directly with an argument designed to show that their beliefs about themselves and their selfhood are either false or susceptible of logical confusion. In fact, Pascal must be sympathetic to those caught in conflicts of doubt and belief, for he thinks we must realize that the human being is—really is—both “infinite and nothing,” the expression with which Pascal begins the wager fragment. Many of the standard ways of attacking the skeptic are simply not open to Pascal, and we must suppose that he was constantly aware of this fact.

Thus, he does not say anything at all that suggests that his argument is intended
to be less than universal. On the contrary, it is not his view that one simply bypasses one's “baser” or illusory self and becomes a being fit for a pure, Platonic order of charity. Pascal holds, rather, that one always has a bodily and a mental nature whether one is a libertine or not and that the order of charity is possible only for those who find a right proportion among the three orders.

The intellect enters the realm of charity only by recognizing its own limitations: “The greatness of man is great in that he recognizes himself as pitiable.” 40 Unless the intellect sees itself in proportion to the order of charity, it fails. But it is capable of seeing this, although, within the order of the intellect, there is no mention of charity. Charity does not rate a description in physics texts. It is not that the physical human being is unimportant—medicine may have much to say about human nature—it is just that neither physics nor its applications have anything to say about the intellect proper nor anything to say about the good.

One can, as Pascal noticed, have a quite perfect body and an intellect that produces nothing, and one can have an intellect that is unsurpassed without having—or needing—“worldly or intellectual eminence.” No one can explain why the order of charity does not equally embrace everyone.

Nevertheless, religious men and women and human beings whose affairs are directed by the order of charity—Ignatius, Mother Theresa, or Mère Angélique at Port-Royal—turn out to have practical concerns and skills as well as the other kinds. But the source of this practical charity is in another philosophical insight, not in the Cartesian intellectual philosophy that Pascal held to be “useless, uncertain, and troublesome.” 41 This other kind of philosophy is, evidently, the one that Pascal hopes to put forward in the Pensées. To investigate further, we must turn to the historical context.