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PASCAL SPEAKS FROM THE GRAVE

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In Think 7, Nigel Warburton attacked Pascal's famous wager on the existence of God. Here, Douglas Groothuis resurrects Pascal to defend the wager.

The joys of heaven almost fail to compensate for the ire I experience when reading the reports of what earthbound mortals are doing with some of my philosophical arguments, particularly the long fragment from my uncompleted treatise on defending the Christian faith, which my relatives posthumously dubbed *Pensées*. (I could think of far better titles, but they did the best they could.) I continue to receive commendations on my scientific writings and not a few histories of science credit me as a key figure in discrediting the medieval superstition that 'nature abhors a vacuum.' For this, I am thankful. But when it comes to assessing the wager, many philosophers, otherwise quite accomplished, fail to discharge their critical faculties adequately. It seems to me that many of them must feel a kind professional obligation to pillory the wager, or at least pale imitations of it. Many supposed invocations of Pascal's wager (even by proponents) are not *Pascal's* wager at all. Another bother is that when anthologies include anything by me, they include the wager by itself without explaining how it fits into my larger philosophy. I did write a few other things besides the wager, one might remember. These are no small sins of omission to my mind.

Since *Think* has published a short deathbed dialogue criticizing my wager (Nigel Warburton, 'The Gambler's Argument,' *Think*, Issue 7, Summer 2004), let me address what I wanted to accomplish by it. Heaven only allows me a short space to respond, so let's get to the meat of the matter. (Most of us up here get no such opportunity; Thomas Aquinas is quite envious of my brief terrestrial treatise.) First, I never finished my proposed apologetic for the Christian faith. From my present vantage point, I see why, but that is beside the point. The

wager fragment is one of the longer fragments from *Pensées*, but it was never meant to stand alone as a complete argument in itself. The diligent student of *Pensées* will find clues as to what I was after and how to interpret the wager. A bit of charity might even the playing field. Where I am, everyone is charitable, and perhaps a little more heaven on earth might clear the air a bit. A close reading of the wager itself will dissipate many of the objections raised against it.

My wager argument was never meant to be an intellectual veto on any knowledge of God whatsoever. The careful reader of *Pensées* (and a few of my other writings) will find a number of arguments for the rationality of Christian belief, even though I dispensed with 'metaphysical arguments' for God's existence (what you now call natural theology). That enterprise was pretty stilted in my day anyway, and I found more compelling arguments for Christianity proper (the entire worldview), not merely for the existence of a First Cause or a Designer. So, I argued that the Christian account of the human condition provides the best explanation of a race east of Eden, but under heaven. I compared the Christian understanding of humans as both created in God's image and fallen from grace with the view of humanity given by several other worldviews, particularly skepticism and stoicism, and found the biblical assessment to be superior. In fact, the argument form I employed is what you now refer to as an 'inference to the best explanation' or 'abduction.' A few earthbound philosophers have recently picked up on this, and have expanded upon this argument, but they are still dwarfed by the throng of those attacking the wager. I give several other arguments for the rationality of faith as well. In fact, my famous quotation, 'The heart has reasons that reason knows nothing of,' is often taken to imply a blind leap of faith in matters of religion. This is not so! By 'heart' I meant an organ of knowledge different from linear ratiocination. Nevertheless, I knew the place of logical arguments, and I offered my share of them.

So, when I called people to believe in the Christian God, I realized that there were other God-candidates. I did not

address that matter in the wager fragment simply because the interlocutor was struggling with a disjunct between the Christian God and no God (as were some of my friends and many of my countrymen at the time). However, I was well aware of Islam and other religions besides Christianity and Judaism. I even argued that Mohammed was inferior to Christ as a religious leader, because, unlike Christ, Mohammed was neither foretold through prophecy nor did he himself prophesy. I also claimed that the Qur'an was less historically and logically credible than the Bible. For example, I wrote that the Qur'an contains teachings that are clear, yet unbelievable and implausible, such as its doctrine of a sensual paradise. These implausible clear ideas render its obscurities incredible as well. They should not be viewed as profound mysteries. On the other hand, as I wrote in *Pensées*

It is not the same with Scripture. I admit that there are obscurities as odd as those of Mahomet, but some things are admirably clear, with prophecies manifestly fulfilled. So it is not an even contest. We must not confuse and treat as equal things which are only alike in their obscurities, and not in the clarity which earns respect for the obscurities. (p.97)

Despite these evidential arguments (and remember, please, they are presented in outline form; I died before I could finish them), I realized that some hardened skeptics — among them some of my own friends — will not be moved by the arguments alone. They needed some strong incentive. As gamblers (and I admit I did a bit of gambling myself during my worldly period), they understand stakes and odds and outcomes. They also understand, to steal a phrase from William James's essay 'The Will to Believe' (despite his rather nasty comment about the wager), that some choices are 'momentous' and 'forced.' To not believe in God may have momentous negative consequences; while believing in God (and not merely theism, but *Christian* theism — that was the whole burden of *Pensées*)

may have momentous positive consequences for this life and in the life to come. Moreover, the situation is forced in that time is running out. One must ultimately take a stand for or against the Christian claim on reality. We cannot avoid the issue by remaining skeptical because, as James (helpful this time) put it, 'although we do avoid in that way error *if religion be untrue*, we lose the good, *if it be true*, just as certainly as if we positively chose to disbelieve.' So, the gambler can see that the stakes are high and that he must wager, 'He is embarked,' as I put it. But how will one choose?

Although I am often misinterpreted on this, I never held to what your philosophers of religion now call 'doxastic voluntarism' — the claim that beliefs can be achieved through the will as easily as one wills to raise one's hand. The dying man in your journal's dialogue complains that he cannot make himself believe in God because he believes theism to be lacking in evidence. I understand his point. You may remember that while the interlocutor in the wager exclaims that on the basis of the prudential outcomes (heaven and hell) it makes sense for him to believe, he still cannot believe. I advise him to attempt to still or ally his belief-retarding passions through religious activities. Too many critics to the contrary (somehow your article didn't mention this old canard), I did not recommend liturgical brainwashing. Rather, I observed that our belief-forming processes are as affected by our passions as well as by reasons. In some cases our passions can be abated a bit through certain courses of action taken over time. As I put it in a dialogue with an unbeliever:

'I should have given up a life of pleasure,' they say, 'if I had faith.' But I tell you: 'You would soon have faith if you gave up a life of pleasure. Now it is up to you to begin. If I could give you faith, I would. But I cannot, nor can I test the truth of what you say, but you can easily give up your pleasure and *test* whether I am telling the truth.' (*Pensées*, p. 273).

I wouldn't expect a life-long agnostic to convert on his death-bed through the kind of approach given by the hapless Christian in your journal's dialogue. But if one's passions that are hostile to Christianity are corralled, the light of truth may break forth. As I put it to the unbeliever in the wager, 'You will realize that you have wagered on something certain and infinite for which you have paid nothing' (*Pensées*, p. 153). 'Certain' here involves an intellectual richness that exceeds what is possible through mere habituation. And elsewhere in the *Pensées* I write of habituation or 'custom' as helping to ground certain beliefs in a rational manner (*Pensées*, p. 274).

Lastly, I realized that the wager, standing alone, would not produce true Christian faith. I was not arguing for faith as mere fire insurance. The wager was rather a starting place for the hardened skeptic, a way to get his attention and challenge him to begin a quest or what might be called 'a devotional experiment'. This is what I ultimately wanted to find in a believing soul, as I indicated in *Pensées*:

True conversion consists in self-annihilation before the universal being whom we have so often vexed and who is perfectly entitled to destroy us at any moment. . . . It consists in knowing that there is an irreconcilable opposition between God and us, and that without a mediator there can be no [salvation] (*Pensées*, 137-138).

There is much more to say, but you do have the *Pensées* and my other philosophical writings if you want to avoid straw man arguments. Aquinas, despite his sainted status, is quite envious of my posthumous essay and is voicing his desire to respond to something said about him down there in a recent article. (Moreover, he is still a bit miffed at me because I abandoned natural theology. We continue to discuss the matter in a most gratifying way.) Perhaps one day he will get his wish as well. I hope so. But the more carefully we sainted philosophers are read on earth, the less agitation there will be

in heaven — and the less need for posthumous philosophical missives.

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All quotes from Blaise Pascal. Pensées. Trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (New York: Penguin Books, 1966).