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WAGERING BELIEF: EXAMINING TWO OBJECTIONS TO PASCAL'S WAGER

Pascal's wager has been the subject of protracted philosophical interest since its posthumous appearance over three centuries ago. As Terence Penelhum has noted, many 'philosophers feel it is somehow a professional obligation not to accept it.'¹ Nevertheless, some modern philosophers have given the wager a sympathetic reading in hopes of its rehabilitation, and I count myself in their number.

Without recounting all the wager's complexities, I will first explain roughly its basic structure and then critique two objections against it that impugn the nature of the religious belief advocated by Pascal. Space limitations will necessitate waiving certain important objections to the wager's prologue concerning the actual prudential situation of the wagerer. My focus will instead be on two aspects of what I will call 'wagering belief': (1) Whether Pascal's recommendations for inducing belief involve an epistemically illicit brainwashing and (2) whether or not the requirement of theistic belief for salvation is defensible on theological grounds.

THE WAGER AND RELIGIOUS BRAINWASHING

Pascal's wager attempts to bring the sceptic to the point of desiring belief in God even though the initial epistemic case for God's existence is indeterminate for that individual. Pascal then marshals the prudential resources of heaven and hell² to persuade the sceptic that he should believe in God. The upshot is that given the possible benefits or detriments of one's beliefs it is safer and smarter to be a theist. If one is a theist and there is no God, less is lost than if one is an atheist and there is a God who requires belief in God for endless felicity.³ The sceptic in Pascal's dialogue is convinced of this prudential reasoning, but confesses that he can yet not believe. Pascal then advises him to act like a believer in order that in time he will become a sincere believer.

Pascal's language indicates that by engaging the religious practices of

¹ Terence Penelhum, *God and Skepticism* (Boston, MA: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1983), p. 69.

² Pascal does not explicitly mention the dangers of hell in the wager. He emphasizes, rather, the possibility of infinite happiness. Nevertheless, the possibility of hell (or infinite unhappiness) seems assumed and important in his argument; and we know from other sources that hell was one of his religious beliefs.

³ For Pascal, belief in theism is a *necessary* but not a *sufficient* condition for heaven, as will be discussed below.

taking holy water and having masses said the wagerer will become ‘docile’ (*abetira*) and eventually believe, just as many others with similar problems have done.⁴ This counsel appeals to what Pascal calls the order of the body – our mechanical or habitual proclivities. Pascal is taken by many to be arguing that belief will occur through the sheer repetition of religious activities until one becomes quite certain of God’s existence. One will believe by habituation not persuasion.

This approach appears open to the charge of self-inflicted, religious brainwashing. Many, including John L. Mackie, have levelled this charge.⁵ Becoming habituated to a proposition such as ‘God exists’ or ‘Unicorns exist’, such that one believes it is true, does nothing to offer any rational justification for it. Nor is any rational justification secured by habituating oneself to the proposition ‘God does not exist’ such that one believes it. Habituation is not argumentation, and if the genesis of any belief is reducible without remainder to habituation, then that belief is not epistemically established (although it might still be true, nevertheless). If the epistemic case between theism and atheism is a standoff, as Pascal seems to say in the prologue, then epistemic justification is not an issue at all – nor at least not *initially* for the sceptic. We are left with only prudential factors at this first stage.

But Pascal does not seem to be arguing that the prudential factor exhausts the possibilities. He has argued that the sceptic’s *passions* inhibit theistic belief because prudential reason – a sober assessment of what actions are appropriate given the fact of normal self-interest – should impel him to believe. Pascal thus may be saying that to become ‘docile’ means to neutralize these inhibiting passions (meaning vices) such that belief has a greater opportunity to break forth. If so, this is not clearly a case of brainwashing. It rather involves an element of testing, as Pascal says elsewhere in a dialogue with a sceptic:

‘I should have given up a life of pleasure,’ they [the sceptics] 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 [about the veracity of religious faith].’⁶

As an Augustinian, Pascal believed that a person was essentially motivated by either cupidity or charity. In other words, one is governed by one’s fallen nature or by grace. If one is dominated by cupidity, religious truth is largely unavailable because one does not have ‘eyes to see’ what is, in fact, there. Yet if one is willing to suspend cupidity, and there are good reasons to do so, charity may break through with faith ensuing. If the passions are checked, the light may dawn. Consider the following examples.

⁴ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* (New York: Penguin, 1985), 418/233. This edition uses the Lafuma enumeration of fragments, which are listed first in the reference. The second number is the older Brunschvlg system.

⁵ John L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford: Oxford Press, 1980), pp. 200–3.

⁶ *Ibid.* 816/240; emphasis added.

The Gospel of John reports Jesus saying to some unbelieving religious leaders, ‘How can you believe [in me] when you seek approval from others?’⁷ Jesus contends that a prideful regard for personal status could inhibit one from apprehending the truth of his identity. Along this line, consider the case of a prideful actor named Charles who, now being past his illustrious prime, refuses to recognize the brilliance of a younger actor, Rodney, who is superbly executing the kinds of roles Charles once excelled in performing. But because of his age, Charles can no longer play the parts that once made him famous and which now are catapulting Rodney into nouveau celebrity. The elder’s pride and jealousy blinds him to the talents of his younger ‘rival’. He refuses to believe that Rodney is a rising star.

Imagine that this actor is counselled by a wise friend – who is interested in reconciling the bemused Charles to the younger ‘rival’ – to watch Rodney’s best acting performance on video tape three times within one week. In so doing, the friend hopes that Charles’s prideful oblivion will be overcome as the actor’s theatrical prowess progressively impresses the old actor with each successive showing. Charles reluctantly consents to the programme and later confesses Rodney’s greatness, along with admitting the blindness of his former pride. He now has eyes to see.

This sort of example is especially germane to the claim Pascal is making regarding cupidity: given the fallen human condition, human pride has the tendency to filter out that which would humble one; and this would especially be true with respect to recognizing the existence of a morally impeccable deity before whom one is exhaustively accountable and without excuse.

These kinds of examples strongly suggest that Pascal’s programme need not be viewed as religious brainwashing. A plausible view is that he is advocating a vulnerability to rational persuasion through various religious practices that may serve to mollify the passions and thus soften one to certain claims not otherwise convincing. This may, in fact, be what Pascal meant when he said that after wagering the one wagering ‘will realize that you have wagered on something certain and infinite for which you have paid nothing’.⁸ Here ‘certain’ may well have an epistemic richness that exceeds both what is possible through mere habituation and what is offered to the sceptic at the beginning of the wager when he can only see the case between theism and atheism as a toss up. We can corroborate this subsequent epistemic enrichment with another fragment from *Pensées* that explains that a wilful change in existential orientation can make new perspectives possible, perspectives that are not necessarily contrived, but, rather, occasioned through voluntary refocusing:

The will is one of the chief organs of belief, *not because it creates belief*, but because things are true or false according to the aspects by which we judge them. When the

⁷ John 5: 44.

⁸ Pascal, 418/233.

will likes one aspect more than another, it deflects the mind from considering the qualities of the one it does not care to see. Thus the mind, keeping in step with the will, remains looking at the aspect preferred by the will and so judged by what it sees there.⁹

The wager argument induces one to attend to areas of concern not normally attractive – through engaging in religious rituals that presuppose a recognition of moral failing and the need for divine grace – in the hope of attaining what is ultimately attractive; that is, peace in this life and heaven in the next. The will is directed to consider life from a different perspective that may become one's own perspective. In this indirect sense, then, 'the will is one of the chief organs of [or for apprehending] belief', although it does not 'create belief'. I take this to mean that a deliberate refocusing of one's attention may lead to new perspectives and insights not otherwise possible.

The prudentially encouraged religious experimentalism advocated by Pascal is clearly distinguishable from any kind of coercive proselytizing that might produce beliefs that are epistemically unreliable due to the doxastic improprieties occasioning their formation. Consider a religious cult that entices new members through deception about the nature of the group and then endeavours to enlist the inquirer's total allegiance to the cult through sleep deprivation, 'love bombing', a restricted diet, arduous propagandizing sessions, and other skilfully administered mental manipulations. Those who succumb to this regimen could form certain beliefs (typically about the infallibility of the cult's leadership and its apocalyptic scenarios) by virtue of their participation in the cult's activities.

However, this cultic indoctrination is a far epistemic cry from the brand of experimentalism Pascal has in mind, in which the wagerer embarks upon the religious experiment conscious of the prudential stakes involved, the truth-claims at issue, and the nature of the (noncoercive) religious activities in which he plans voluntarily to participate. He is never required to submit to any doxastic improprieties.

It could be argued, though, that Pascal's approach begs the question as to whether the Christian God exists because he assumes that sin (a specifically Christian doctrine) hinders people from believing in God. This objection seems to fail, though, because Pascal does not require that the wagerer adopt the Christian view of sin (he is still too sceptical for that), but rather that he pursue certain religious activities that might illumine cognitive avenues not now available – one of which would be the Christian view of sin. The religious activities may be pursued with a kind of experimentalism which does not require a dogmatic affirmation at the onset.

The above construction of the Pascalian project is still somewhat programmatic. A more nuanced account of just what is involved in seeking to suspend passion for the sake of possible illumination needs elaboration. Such an

⁹ *Ibid.* 539/99; emphasis mine.

account would also cash out just what kinds of epistemic factors might become more believable through religious habituation. However, I believe the broad outlines of such a project are essentially Pascalian, philosophically plausible, and capable of further development – if, that is, the concept of having to believe in God's existence is a legitimate stipulation for divine blessing.

IS BELIEF THEOLOGICALLY CRUCIAL?

Several objectors to the wager argue that Pascal's Deity has no business demanding belief as a prerequisite for salvation because it is somehow morally reprehensible that any deity should do so. If this charge stands, the impetus for the wager crumbles. Why, the critic inveighs, should one's eternal fate be contingent on believing in the existence of a particular God? What makes belief in God paramount *to God*? Why does God place such a premium on theological rectitude?

John Hick casts the wager in a very bad light when he says that a wager would be rational only if we conceive of God as 'a touchy Eastern potentate' who demands that we 'make a slight bow before his apparently empty throne whenever we pass it'.¹⁰ This is a conception he takes to be morally absurd. William James¹¹ and Penelhum¹² voice similar concerns. For these critics, a deity demanding belief is a kind of egotistic sovereign not worthy of religious consideration.

Contrary to Hick, if certain religious practices may help induce an epistemically warranted belief in God (as I argued above), the throne will not, then, be 'apparently empty' at all. But this still leaves the issue of whether the supposed occupant is but a 'touchy Eastern potentate' – meaning a theologically distorted projection of ancient Semitic fears that Pascal inherited.

Although the prudential results of the wager turn on whether one believes in God or not, to limit Pascal's position to this factor would be misleading because theological assent alone cannot be artificially divorced from the entire religious life Pascal is advocating. He is arguing that one who makes the wager and comes to faith is in a unique position to receive spiritual and ethical benefits not otherwise available, both in this life and in the next. Speaking to his interlocutor near the end of the wager fragment, Pascal says,

Now what harm will come to you from choosing this course? You will be faithful, honest, humble, grateful, full of good works, a sincere, true friend... It is true you will not enjoy noxious pleasures, glory and good living, but will you not have others?¹³

¹⁰ John Hick, *Faith and Knowledge*, 2nd ed. (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1966), p. 34.

¹¹ William James, *The Will to Believe* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1956), p. 6.

¹² Terence Penelhum, *Religion and Rationality* (New York: Random House, 1971), pp. 211–19. In his later volume, *God and Skepticism*, Penelhum does give some favourable comments on the wager: see pages 69–74.

¹³ Pascal, 418/233.

Believing in God is not simply an isolated act of assent divorced from the contours of one's overall life. Faith in God is, according to Pascal, rather seen as a means to the end of changing one's entire existence – an end that is otherwise unavailable. For instance, if I endeavour to become a great violinist, I need a master teacher. I cannot teach myself successfully, even if I am a child prodigy. Yet I will never progress as a violinist if I refuse to believe in the worthiness of a virtuoso instructor. I must believe in her ability to teach me and follow her instructions in order to receive the training that will enable me to advance as a musician. If I deny either that I need an instructor or that the instructor is capable, I cannot enter into a musically transforming relationship.

Pascal's claim is much the same. He doesn't view belief in God as an isolated event distinct either from other theistically entailed beliefs or from the believer's overall pattern of life and world-view. One is not simply adding a single, atomistic belief to one's epistemic repertoire. To finally find faith 'the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob' one must recognize a need for salvation which involves an admission of moral wrongdoing and the need for forgiveness and moral renewal. (Although, as mentioned earlier, one does not assent to all these Christian doctrines in order to *begin* the wagering process.) One is also urged to believe and receive the benefits of belief; that is, the grace of God which transfigures one's moral and spiritual life both in this life and in the one to come. Pascal says 'No one is so happy as a true Christian, or so reasonable, virtuous, and lovable.'¹⁴ Pascal views these desirable states as impossible apart from belief in God.

It ought to be kept in mind that Pascal is presupposing neither a 'touchy Eastern potentate' nor the 'God of the philosophers' who makes little difference existentially, but a personal being who enters into transforming relationships with his creatures. Pascal highlights this when he differentiates the living God from others:

The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, the God of the Christians is a God of love and consolation: he is a God who fills the soul and heart of those whom he possesses: he is a God who makes them inwardly aware of their wretchedness and his infinite mercy: who unites himself with them in the depths of their soul: who fills it with humility, joy, confidence and love: who makes them incapable of having any other end but him.¹⁵

This God does not require irrational genuflection for the sake of a Cosmic Ego starved of flatteries. Hick to the contrary, more than 'a slight bow' is required before this deity. Faith is required for the restoration of the creature as well as for the glorification of the Creator. Pascal intimates this at the end of the wager fragment where he confesses to the interlocutor that he prayed to God that this argument might bring the interlocutor to submit himself to God for his own good and for God's glory.¹⁶

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 357/541.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 449/556.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 418/233.

Pascal's claim is that a certain kind of moral and spiritual transformation is impossible without the benefits of belief and spiritual commitment. This is a controversial claim inextricably tied to his doctrine of the fall, but the argument given above, I think, deflects the criticisms that maintain that it is unjust to reward one merely on the basis of belief.

Although in the wager fragment Pascal speaks only of assenting to God's existence, his argumentation in other important fragments includes appeals to trust in Christ, the Mediator, as required for divine benefit. For example, Pascal says:

We know God only through Jesus Christ. Without this mediator all communication with God is broken off. Through Jesus we know God. All who have claimed to know God and prove his existence without Jesus Christ have only had futile proofs to offer.¹⁷

He also says:

Knowing God without knowing our own wretchedness makes for pride.
Knowing our own wretchedness without knowing God makes for despair.
Knowing Jesus Christ strikes the balance because he shows us both God and our own wretchedness.¹⁸

Pascal's Christian world-view is also implicit in the wager when he speaks of engaging in specifically Christian religious practices (having masses said, taking holy water) in order to induce *Christian* (and not simply theistic) belief.¹⁹ Thus, for Pascal, belief in the deity is a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for eternal life. One must entrust oneself to the grace of the Mediator to receive that grace.

CONCLUSION: WAGERING BELIEF NOT DEFEATED

The wager has generated tremendous opposition on several grounds, many of which we cannot now discuss. Nevertheless, I have argued that Pascal's account of wagering belief meets two important and related objections to its legitimacy. These are objections that must be neutralized if the wager argument is to have any hope of being defended or rehabilitated for purposes Pascal would recognize as his own. First, the pursuit of religious practices for the sake of attaining certainty need not be a self-induced brainwashing; it can be understood as a prudent experiment making legitimate belief possible. Second, God's stipulation of theistic belief need not be interpreted as an arbitrary theological dictate issued by a cranky deity but can be understood as a constitutive epistemic element of the overall spiritual restoration of the Christian believer.

Although I have defended the wager argument against only two of several

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 189/543.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 192/527.

¹⁹ The Protestant reader may dissent and advise less specifically Roman Catholic practices, but the point still stands.

possible objections, these are frequently offered and often reckoned as fatal to Pascal's cause. Yet if my defence is successful, philosophers who feel a professional obligation to pillory the wager might take stock of its resiliency and ability to inspire modern defences.²⁰

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²⁰ My thanks go to R. Douglas Geivett for his helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.