

Pascal's Wager is a Lie: An Epistemic Interpretation of the Ultimate Pragmatic Argument

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Piquant, convincing, powerful, and mildly heretical—Pascal's Wager is a philosopher's dream. But despite its initial appeal, the Wager seems to fail on logical grounds. In truth, it is a philosopher's nightmare. Scholars scrutinize the Wager in isolation, using mathematics and logic to unravel the entire argument. But the Wager is neither a mathematical claim nor an isolated passage. Rather, Blaise Pascal intended for it to be understood within a certain context, and for this reason the Wager should be examined relative to its contextual bearings. Such a contextualization of the passage indicates that the argument is not mathematical but rhetorical, that the fundamental argument is not pragmatic but epistemic, and that the Wager itself is a lie.

While the Wager is often thought of as its own, isolated entity, it exists in a very specific intended context. But this is not popularly appreciated. William James introduces it as the “celebrated passage known in literature as Pascal's Wager” (5). While many understand the passage's place in a greater work—James included—this introduction illustrates the popular perception of the passage as an iconic thought, recognized primarily by its own name rather than in relation to its greater context.

Determining the context of the passage is not completely straightforward. In his last years, Pascal began to write an apology for the Christian religion but died before completing it. What remains are his complicated and disorganized work notes, which were collected and published as his

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Pensées (or “thoughts”) after his death (Davidson 75). While it is impossible to know exactly what the finished project would have looked like, it is certain that Pascal would have published it in a different form and order than the one seen in the *Pensées* (94). Nevertheless, thanks to industrious efforts in textual criticism, it is possible to construct from the original *salmagundi* of notes an idea of how the apology would have appeared, both in terms of specific passages and overall organization. In particular, it appears that the Wager was meant to play an important role in the apology and most likely belongs near the very beginning (Wetsel 13). Since the passage clearly had an intended context, any examination of the Wager should try to account for this by considering both the Wager’s immediate context and its relationship to the greater argument of the apologetic work, so far as anyone is able.

Yet most examinations of the Wager fail to account for any context and proceed to subject it to mathematical rigor for which it may not have been intended. Given Pascal’s reputation as a famous mathematician, the mathematical words and concepts in the passage (such as infinity and chance), and the inherent nature of the argument, it is tempting to treat the passage as a mathematical argument. As philosophers attempt to grapple with the passage by itself, they analyze it using decision theory as a decision problem under risk (Anderson 45). They then reduce the passage to a simplified chart and calculate the “expected utility” of each possible outcome (47). The Wager is also decomposed into its premises and claims (Duncan 280). After they have translated the literary passage into the language of mathematics and logic, these philosophers quarrel over various objections that result from the lack of rigor in the “proof”—such as the many-gods objection, which capitalizes on Pascal’s failure to account for gods other than the Christian one. In addition to this cavil, there is the many-theologies objection, the St. Petersburg Paradox, and the vague-probabilities objection, among others.¹ In evaluating these various objections, Jeff Jordan, like many scholars, tries to determine “if the Wager succeeds” (“Introduction” 1) or if the “objection [succeeds]” (*Arguments* 118). In other words, does the Wager stand up to the objection in a logical analysis or not? For Jordan, the validity of the Wager hinges upon its ability to withstand such objections. Naturally, this approach to the Wager has resulted in a cycle of scholastic objections and defenses.

¹ The many-gods and many-theologies objections are the two most abundant. Both Anderson and Jordan (in his *Arguments*), outline these objections as well as others, especially those regarding the problems that arise when applying the Wager to various utility equations. For information on the St. Petersburg Paradox, see Jordan, *Arguments*, 110-18. For information on vague probabilities, an objection raised by Alan Hájek, see Duncan.

In entertaining and evaluating all of these objections scholars treat the Wager as an isolated, mathematical proposition and subject it to the logical and mathematical rigor associated with modern mathematics and rationality. However, this is not how Pascal intended the passage to be treated. As James Connor notes, Pascal makes no claims to metaphysical or mathematical compulsion (186). This is seen throughout the passage as the *libertin* (the interlocutor) makes several interjections, not one of which relates to the mathematical aspects of the Wager. The *libertin's* disinterest in the logical aspects of the Wager may indicate that Pascal himself was not concerned with them. The rest of Pascal's apology is an otherwise rhetorical and unmathematical argument. To consider the Wager as a solitary mathematical argument within an otherwise irrational and theological work would be imprudent and neglectful of the Wager's context. Additionally, by analyzing the Wager as a mathematical proof, one strips the passage of its literary, stylistic, and rhetorical excellence. Certainly the mathematical aspects of the Wager are extremely provocative, which makes examining the Wager in a mathematical context both a valuable and worthwhile endeavor for philosophy and mathematics; however, it is clear from the Wager's context that such a rational examination is not what Pascal intended.

Pascal outlines his explicit goals and purposes for the Wager in the immediate context. He sets up the Wager as part of "a Letter [*sic*] to incite to the search after God," in which he plans to show "that religion is not contrary to reason" and that one rationally *ought* to believe in God (52). Thus the passage is addressed not to a believer, but to a *libertin*. The argument is intended to prove to a seventeenth century French *libertin* in a highly Roman Catholic culture that Christian theism is not irrational, but even to his advantage. Even if not successful, evaluated with respect to these goals, the Wager should be considered at least highly persuasive—indeed, the argument to self-advantage is perhaps the most persuasive argument. But it is precisely this self-advantage component that raises a problem. Should not God and the belief in Him be ends rather than means? There is something inherently distorted in this self-motivated approach to faith. This is precisely the sentiment that William James and Nicholas Rescher pick up on. While Connor dismisses the claim (186), it is a very real one that merits serious attention. Thus, on the surface, taking the Wager within its immediate given context creates a problematic situation.

James and Rescher each provide an explanation. James describes the Wager as "a last desperate snatch at a weapon against the hardness of the unbelieving heart" (6). In other words, while the purer and nobler conceptions of faith are preferable, Pascal is reaching out to a defiant doubter in a last effort to convert him. Under these circumstances, according to James, Pascal is willing to resort to notions of less pure faith so long as to reach

the *libertin*: it is not an ideal but a last resort. However, this alone fails to address the problem satisfactorily. Rescher continues this line of thought and resolves the problem by placing the Wager within a larger picture. He, too, recognizes that God would prefer to be loved for himself alone rather than for prudential motives, but that with men such as the *libertin*, Pascal must begin somewhere (121). But Rescher concludes:

The Wager argument is thus no more than a starting point . . . A faith based on prudential self-interest is not—cannot be—the end of the line. But Pascal sees it as a virtually inevitable place to begin for many or most men. To his mind what is unworthy is not his argumentation but rather its addressees. (122)

Rescher, like James, recognizes that this method (the argument of self-interest) is suboptimal. But Rescher is not satisfied with the former *libertin* nurturing an impure faith based on crass considerations. He reconciles this by viewing the Wager as the first step in the *libertin's* conversion. Thus, impure faith is not his ultimate faith, but rather an intermediate yet unfortunately necessary step (at least for the *libertin*). Though he begins as a doubter, through the argument of the Wager he develops faith in God based on self-interest (but faith in God nonetheless), which in time might be refined and purified into proper faith. Furthermore, this interpretation is strengthened by Wetsel's belief that the Wager would have been at the beginning of Pascal's apology, and thus would have formed the work's first step (13). Thus, by envisioning the Wager within its larger context, namely, Pascal's greater apologetic plans, Rescher is able to reconcile the otherwise problematic use of self-interest as an argument for belief in God.

The Wager, then, as a first step in Pascal's apology, acts as a catalyst. According to Pascal, the primary inhibitor of the *libertin's* accepting Christianity is his innate disposition against it: he observes that "men despise religion; they hate it, and fear it is true," and that the Wager must act as a "remedy" for this (52). The *libertin's* passions not only prevent him from accepting Christianity but also make him ill-disposed toward attempts to convert him. With this in mind, Bernard Howell argues, despite what Pascal explicitly claims, that the Wager "is not an argument aimed at proving the profitableness of belief but a tactic which is intended to bring to the surface the moral hostility that exists within the *libertin* towards the truths and attitudes associated with true religion" (47). Howell understands the Wager as more than a simple first step. He identifies the broader purpose: the Wager, in a sense, loosens the *libertin's* hostilities, thus overcoming the primary inhibition in the conversion. A doubter naturally resists attempts to convert him because of his natural hostile attitude toward religion, and

thus the first step is to remove this tension. Quite significantly, Howell is able to perceive a tacit rhetorical strategy underlying the seemingly rational and straightforward argument. He interprets the Wager not as a rational proof of the utility of believing in God, as some have done, but rather as a rhetorical ploy, which is part of an overall strategy to convert the doubter. In suggesting that the surface argument is not Pascal's true intention, he complicates Rescher's conclusion. Whereas Rescher saw the Wager as a device to incite impure faith in doubters, Howell, while still viewing the Wager as the initial step, considers it a rhetorical device used to make the *libertin* more receptive to Christianity by subduing his internal hostilities toward religion.

The rhetorical interpretation that Howell suggests is consistent with Pascal's other notes in the *Pensées*. Indeed, Pascal appears to be rather interested in persuasion, eloquence, and rhetoric. In particular, he notes: "When we wish to correct with advantage...people are generally better persuaded by the reasons which they have themselves discovered than by those which have come into the mind of others" (4). Howell sees Pascal's Wager as exemplary of this perceptive observation. The Wager's form—a dialogue replete with interjections from an imaginary interlocutor—makes it especially conducive to this type of correction. Just as in the Greek tradition, it leads the doubter step by step to the ultimate conclusion rather than imposing a dogmatic truth on an unwilling and thus resistive mind. Another of Pascal's jotted notes reflects his understanding of the difference between the two methods: "Eloquence . . . persuades by sweetness, not by authority" (5). Indeed, Pascal's Wager is a persuasion of great sweetness—infinite sweetness, to be precise. Pascal appears to be especially aware of the persuasive potency of the argument of self-advantage, as he observes in this passage: "naturally men love only what may be useful to them" (57). Such evidence throughout the *Pensées* corroborates the rhetorical interpretation and helps confirm the earlier claim that the mathematical interpretation of the Wager may not be the one Pascal intended.

This rhetorical interpretation can be further qualified by taking it in conjunction with observations from Thomas Morris. Morris claims that Pascal "believed that Christian theism is true and, furthermore, that a fair, unbiased inquirer could come to see that there is a substantial body of evidence in favor of its truth to be found in the world" (49). Evidence in the *Pensées* seems to corroborate this claim. After the Wager, the rest of the work appears to be a continuous epistemic argument for the validity and truth of Christian theism—from positive arguments, such as that the Christian religion alone sufficiently accounts for and explains the human condition, to negative ones, as seen in section IX where Pascal examines and refutes the claims of skeptics, various philosophies, and other religions. He

then offers as evidence various prophecies, miracles, and further proofs of Christ. In particular, two related quotations are highly indicative of Pascal's belief in epistemic arguments for Christianity. In one fragment, Pascal says, "Let us therefore examine all the religions of the world, and see if there be any other than the Christian which is sufficient" (115). In a later note, he concludes, "Therefore I reject all other religions" (222). In entertaining the thought of conducting an evaluation of Christianity and the other religions of the world, let alone writing a book's worth of notes doing so, Pascal clearly believes that epistemic arguments are not only possible arguments but even sufficiently powerful ones for Christianity. Based on this understanding of Pascal's theology, Morris claims that the Wager is part of this epistemic argument:

[The Wager] was intended to put us in a better epistemic position to access the evidence that does exist and then, perhaps, to help us develop to the point where we are capable of having a more direct and intimate experience of religious truth than even the best of evidential considerations can provide. (60)

Whereas Howell's interpretation explains how the Wager works, Morris is able to articulate the greater purpose of the Wager. By integrating all of the aforementioned observations into the rhetorical interpretation of the Wager, one arrives at a convincing explanation for the Wager that accounts both for the Wager itself and for its place in the surrounding context: Pascal presented the Wager as an argument to address the doubter in such a way that neutralizes the passions that interfere with conversion. This is intended to allow the doubter to consider the epistemic arguments for Christianity, which constitute the remainder of the Christian apology. The visibly pragmatic argument of the Wager is in fact part of a greater epistemic argument of the apology.

This interpretation provides a convincing explanation of the Wager, satisfactorily accounts for its context within the intended apology, and coheres with Pascal's theological framework. But one glaring contradiction stands out: the very basis for the Wager is that epistemic arguments are insufficient. At the outset of the Wager, Pascal explains, "We are . . . incapable of knowing either what He is or if He is" and that "reason can decide nothing here" (66). This explicit renunciation of the utility of epistemic arguments for Christian theism is entirely contradictory to Pascal's theological framework as understood by Morris and espoused throughout the *Pensées*, as well as to the otherwise sound rhetorical interpretation of the Wager as previously expounded. The very necessity of the pragmatic

argument for the belief in God is the insufficiency of the epistemic argument, and thus the basis of the Wager is antithetical to the epistemic argument of the apology of which the Wager is a part.

It suffices to say that it is difficult to reconcile the Wager with the greater apologetic argument. One possibility is that Pascal is sincere in admitting the insufficiency of the epistemic argument; however, this is unlikely in light of the previously developed arguments, especially Morris's, which bluntly contradict this conclusion. Additionally, this possibility offers no explanation for why Pascal devoted so much time and effort to constructing the succeeding epistemic arguments for Christianity, all of which appear to be sincere. Given the quantity of the epistemic arguments, as well as their coherency with one another and with the greater apologetic framework, this first possibility appears doubtful. A second possibility is that the Wager is a brilliant, provocative, but isolated thought, which, while extraneous to the apologetic argument, Pascal nevertheless decided to include, deeming the Wager such a fascinating idea that he must share it. Indeed, perhaps Pascal fully recognized the Wager's inconsistency with epistemic argumentation but incorporated it anyway—or rather simply jotted it down as an interesting aside among his many notes. While this explanation may be initially plausible, it disintegrates quickly: as aforementioned, Wetsel noted that textual criticism indicates that the Wager formed not only an integral role in the greater apologetic work but was the beginning and indeed the cornerstone of it, as the remaining arguments make clear.

It appears, then, that the explanation most consistent with modern literary criticism, Pascal's epistemic theology, and Pascal's other notes in his *Pensées*, is the inevitable conclusion: Pascal's Wager is a lie. In other words, despite Pascal's own belief that faith in God can be achieved through epistemic arguments, the Wager adopts the counter position because Pascal recognizes that the skeptical *libertin* is categorically opposed to the idea of epistemic arguments for faith. It would be too difficult to convince a *libertin* of this—he would reject it because of his natural internal hostility to the idea. Rather, Pascal appears to be following his own advice regarding persuasion:

When we wish to correct with advantage, and to show another that he errs, we must notice from what side he views the matter, for on that side it is usually true, and admit that truth to him, but reveal to him the side on which it is false. He is satisfied with that, for he sees that he was not mistaken, and that perhaps arises from the fact that man naturally cannot see everything, and that naturally he cannot

err in the side he looks at, since the perceptions of our sense are always true. (4)

This passage is the key to understanding the Wager, which is chiefly concerned with perspective. Observe the exact parallels between Pascal's own advice on persuasion and the Wager itself: Pascal, in trying to defend Christianity to the *libertin* and subsequently convert him, is explicitly attempting to "correct" and "show another that he errs" (4). He observes the *libertin's* perspective and admits to him, mendaciously, that epistemic arguments are insufficient and that whether God exists or not cannot be known. Indeed, if Pascal were to begin the conversation with the alternative, the natural repugnance of the thought to the *libertin* would turn him away immediately. However, Pascal, cognizant of this and acutely aware of the nature of persuasion, considers the *libertin's* perspective and entices him to entertain the Wager, which places the *libertin* in a significantly improved position to receive the epistemic arguments that Pascal renounced at the onset of the Wager. In this way, the Wager removes the natural hostilities in the *libertin*, which would otherwise inhibit his receiving the later epistemic arguments. In a few tactful lines, Pascal reverses the *libertin's* perspective. Now the *libertin* is ready for the remainder of the work, and Pascal may begin his epistemic argumentation. The Wager, then, when properly contextualized, is a masterful ploy—a white lie, consistent with Pascal's apologetic aims and his unparalleled perception into the art of persuasion.

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