

THE IMPLICATIONS OF BLAISE PASCAL'S WAGER AND HIS RELEVANCE FOR TODAY'S FAITH

Introduction

On the 50th anniversary of the opening of the Second Ecumenical Vatican Council, the Holy Father Emeritus, Benedict XVI, proclaimed for the whole Catholic Church the Year of Faith that started on October 11, 2012 and will conclude on November 24, 2013. The pope defined the event as an opportunity to deepen the documents of the Second Vatican Council and the Catechism of the Catholic Church. In the note that the Congregation for the doctrine of faith published for the occasion, it insisted that the Year of Faith might be designed to aid in the joyous rediscovery of the faith and its renewed transmission.

The deepening of faith and the renewal of its transmission require that we are attentive to any material that can help in the re-building and the strengthening of our faith. The celebration of the year of faith, in fact, offers us an opportunity, in studying the writings of Christian authors, to deepen and strengthen Christian faith. Blaise Pascal is certainly one of the many Christians who, in their time, have marked the Christian faith by defending its relevance against its detractors. The context of general crisis of Europe in which he wrote, the uncertainty provoked by the cultural transition of the Scientific Revolution and his effort to establish the reasonability of Christian endeavor makes him more than interesting to explore and examine about faith.

In the following paper, I will revisit his thought, especially with regard to his wager on the existence of God, in order to show his contribution to the enhancement of Christian faith. The main goal I pursue is to engage a conversation with him in such a way that it leads us to fully embrace Christian faith as a reasonable enterprise susceptible of bringing us peace of mind, hope and purpose in life. In four points, I will, first, present the life of Blaise Pascal; then, I will describe the context through which he postulated the wager on the existence of God. Third, I will talk about his wager on the existence of God before examining his relevance for today's faith.

I. WHO WAS BLAISE PASCAL?

Blaise Pascal was a French thinker, inventor, physicist, mathematician and philosopher. He was born in Clermont-Ferrand, in France, on June 19, 1623. He was a child prodigy who was educated by his father, Etienne Pascal, a tax collector, from Rouen. After the death of his wife, Antoinette Begon, Etienne moved to Paris with his son Blaise and his daughter Jacqueline, where he continued to work for the French government. Pascal died in Paris when he was just 39 on August 19, 1662.

Blaise Pascal wrote a variety of ideas gathered posthumously after his death in what is known as “Les penseés de Pascal” (The Thoughts of Pascal). Still young and in his teenage, Pascal made important contributions to the study of fluids and clarified the concepts of pressure and vacuum. His researches in physics have contributed to the advancement in the field of hydrodynamics. He invented the mechanical calculator and the programming language in mathematics is named after him. He strongly influenced the development of modern economics and social science.

From the point of view of Religious reflection and Christian apologetics, Pascal is well known for his wager on the existence of God. In what is following, I will not talk about the other aspects of his thoughts, but I will rather focus exclusively on his wager on the existence of God from which I will draw the implications for today’s faith.

II. THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF PASCAL’S WAGER

In order to better grasp Pascal’s wager on the existence of God, we need to understand the philosophical and historical background of the seventeenth century in which he lived and developed his thought.

In fact, historians characterize the seventeenth century in Europe as a century of Scientific Revolution and General Crisis. At that period of time, the skepticism was raising seriously throughout the whole Europe. The Medieval Philosophy and Medieval Theology that provided the basis for the proofs of the existence of God by referring to the natural world was ignored and even rejected by the new thinkers of the Scientific Revolution.

As the classic arguments in favor of the existence of God were no longer popularly believed, the question of what to tell to the skeptical mind of that age became important. It is in that perspective that Pascal formulated the wager as an effort to bring the unbeliever to the belief in God.

Before proposing the full thought on the wager, Pascal examines three important statements on the existence of God, namely theism, the atheism and the agnosticism.

According to Webster's Dictionary, theism is the belief in the existence of God viewed as the creative source of the human race and the world, and known by revelation. Atheism is the belief that there is no God or the denial that God exists. Agnosticism is the doctrine that affirms that the human mind cannot know whether God exists or not.

First of all, Pascal rejects agnosticism as absurd and unreasonable. He rejects also atheism as foolish, because it denies the evidence established by the Scriptures. Through a couple of examples, he shows how agnosticism is a worse enemy of a reasonable man. Let us follow these examples in order to understand the core argument of what will concourse to the development of Pascal's wager:

1. Suppose you hear a report that your house is on fire and your children are inside. You do not know whether the report is true or false. What would be the reasonable thing to do, to ignore it or to take the time to run home or at least to call home just in case the report is true?
2. Suppose that a winning ticket of a lottery is worth 200 millions of dollars, and there are only two tickets left. However, you know that one of them is the winning ticket, while the other is worth nothing, and you are allowed to buy only one of the two tickets, at random. Would it not be a good investment to spend two dollars on the good chance of winning 200 million?

As it appears, no reasonable person will hesitate to try his chance. For Pascal, to believe in God is something like that. It is therefore the height of the folly not "to bet on God", even if you have no certainty, no proof, no guaranty that your bet will win.

3. Now, imagine that you are playing a game for two prizes. You wager blue chips to win blue prize and red chips to win red prizes. The blue chips are your mind, your reason, and the blue prize is the truth about God's existence. The red chips are your will, your desires, and the red prize is heavenly happiness. Everyone wants certainly both prizes, truth and happiness.

Now suppose that there is no way of calculating how to play the blue chips. Suppose your reason cannot win you the truth. In that case, you can still calculate how to play the red chips. Therefore, it is important to believe in God, not because your reason can prove with certainty that God exists, but because your will seeks happiness, and God is your only chance of attaining happiness eternally.

In all the above mentioned examples, Pascal shows the absurdity of agnosticism and its foolishness. Once he has established that agnosticism is impossible and atheism is false, and both have to be rejected, the only remaining possibility was to bet about the existence of God. It is from this point of view that Pascal has formulated the wager on the existence of God.

III. PASCAL'S WAGER

From the outset, Pascal begins by painting a situation where both the existence and non-existence of God are impossible to prove by human reason. Given such a situation, the truth between the two options should be a matter of a wager by weighing the possible consequences. Pascal's assumption, then, is that, when it comes to making a decision, no one can refuse to participate; withholding assent is impossible because we are already "embarked" (involved), effectively living out the choice.

The wager posits that there is more to be gained from wagering on the existence of God than from atheism. It affirms also that a rational person should live as though God exists, even though the truth of the matter cannot actually be known.

In fact, Pascal's argument about the wager is rooted in game theory. It shows that the best course of action is to believe in God, whatever might be the condition, because that option gives the biggest gain apart from the existence of God or his non-existence.

The philosophical logic that sustains Pascal's wager can be formulated as following:

1* If you believe in God and God does exist, you will be rewarded with eternal life in heaven: thus an infinite gain.

2* If you do not believe in God and God does exist, you will be condemned to remain in hell forever: thus an infinite loss.

3* If you believe in God and God does not exist, you will not be rewarded: thus a finite loss.

4* If you do not believe in God and God does not exist, you will not be rewarded, but you have lived your own life: thus a finite gain.

The costs are said to be finite because of human mortality. Mathematically speaking, it means that a finite gain or loss is negligible compared to the infinite gain or loss that has to do with eternal life. From this reasoning, Pascal concludes that it is much better to believe in God rather than not. That is why for Pascal, if God does not exist, it does not matter how someone wagers, for there is nothing to win after death and nothing to lose after death. But, if God does exist, the only chance of winning eternal happiness is to believe in him, and the only chance of losing it is to refuse to believe in him.

The wager has many applications. For instance, it was a ground breaking in probability theory and decision theory. In the wager, believing in God produces the large gain whereas not believing produces the greater losses. To believe in God gives a reward of eternal life, while disbelief in God gives the punishment of hell.

The wager also offers a way of dealing with uncertainty by assessing the magnitude of potential gains against losses. Moreover, when dealing with the unknown events, the wager can help eliminate the need to understand the probabilities behind events because decisions can be made by maximizing potential benefits and minimizing harms.

IV. CRITICISM OF PASCAL'S WAGER

Many critics find the line of argument developed by Pascal with his formulation of the wager weak and inconsistent. The range of criticism goes from the assumption of the existence of multiple gods that makes the choice between one or another difficult; the contradiction between the many existing religions and rites that compete to the point that one does not know really what to opt for; the presupposition of voluntarism with which the wager assumes that a human being has the ability to believe in God and the fact that faith being an act of the will, nobody can be forced to believe, etc.

While the atheists criticize the benefits of a deity whose realm is beyond reason, some reproach the wager for its use of a language that is almost deistic. In the same way, some critics have objected to Pascal's wager on the grounds that he wrongly assumes what type of epistemic character God would likely value in his rational creatures if he existed without necessarily offering an alternative conception of God in case he would not exist.

In spite of this negative criticism, which is not exhaustive anyway, there is something positive we can learn from Pascal. As a matter of fact, his thought on the wager has some credit in the sense that it raises the question of the importance of faith without which it would be difficult to obtain eternal life. Pascal raises also the question of the limits of human life that is continually threatened by the reality of death. Finally, Pascal raises the question of the importance of today as a moment of decision in favor of God. Let us see these points in detail.

V. THE MERITS OF PASCAL'S WAGER

After the presentation on Pascal's wager and its relevance, let us now examine its implications for today's faith and see how it can contribute to the enhancement of Christian faith.

a) The importance of today and the making of decision in favor of God.

We live in a culture, where anytime we have to do something, we are told: "take your time; do not rush things". Such an invitation is not at all negative; it contains positive

insights that lead to patience, analysis and reflection before acting. In fact, there is a lot of good in doing so in the sense that when we are dealing with important matters, we need to take the time to observe, to judge the pros and the cons of what we are about to do, before coming to a definitive decision. In that perspective, our decision cannot be a rush one, but the result of a mature reflection that would have helped us to analyze the facts before us and the possible consequences which would come out of our acts. If we make a decision in such circumstances, it has the chance of being correct even if it is true that we can also make a mistake.

But as each medal has its reverse side, what is helpful in dealing with things in ordinary life does not mean necessarily that it can be beneficial to our relationship with God. In fact, because of the influence of our culture, there is a tendency in some people to delay and postpone for tomorrow what they can do today for their relationship with God. In order to be fair, let me say that from time to time, such a tendency is in each one of us.

Human experience has taught us, however, that the grace we do not seize today, we never know if we will have it tomorrow again. We do not know if tomorrow will bring us the same circumstances and chances we are losing today. In that perspective, the question of the decision we have to make today for our relationship with God becomes more than important. As it is vital to our relationship with God, so it is essential to our eternal life.

That is why it is in our interest that we do not delay what we can do today under the pretext that we still have the time to think about it. Who knows if we will have that time tomorrow? Pascal is sensitive to the reality of making a decision today when we still have the opportunity to do so. He is inviting us to understand that we cannot delay indefinitely our decision in so important a matter concerning our eternal life.

As the Letter to the Hebrews says, in repeating the Psalm 95, "if today you hear his voice, harden not your heart" (Hebrews 3: 15). That today is a time of conversion which is rooted in God's grace that he gives us every day. We have to take advantage of it and bring some order in our life and in our relationship with our fellows and our God. To continually delay things because we think that we still have time for conversion, on the basis of our relative young age or of our present good health, is not prudent and wise.

Who really knows what can happen to us tomorrow? Do not put for tomorrow, what you can do today! When God's grace comes your way and is still at hand, seize it.

Peter Kreeft has a wonderful development he presents on this subject in commenting on Pascal. He refers to the famous story of Romeo Juliet by showing how it is important to make our decision when it is still time. Suppose that Romeo proposes to Juliet and Juliet says, "Give me some time to make up my mind." Suppose that Romeo keeps coming back day after day, and Juliet keeps saying the same thing day after day: "Perhaps tomorrow." In the words of a small, female, red-haired American philosopher, "Tomorrow is always a day away. And there comes a time when there are no more tomorrows. Then "maybe" becomes "no". Romeo will die. Corpses do not marry. Christianity is God's marriage proposed to the soul. Saying "may be" and "perhaps tomorrow cannot continue indefinitely because life does not continue indefinitely.

b) Facing the reality of death and the acceptance of the limits of human life

As a Parish priest, one of the privileges I have in my life is to prepare people who are terminally ill for the last moment of their life by giving them the sacrament of the sick. The encounter with those people has often left me sometimes perplexed because of the variety of the experience I have had. While some people were well prepared to the last moment of their life and understood quite well what was going on with them as they moved from life to death, others, unprepared, did not want at all to leave this world in spite of the evidence of the contrary because of the disease they had.

As the first category of people has provoked my admiration, the second as well has often astonished me. Although the reasons why people do not think about their death are diverse, a common constant is that they have come to be accustomed to the present life and its attractions that they think that it is all we have in this world.

In that perspective, when the moment of leaving the world comes up, they are so saddened and unprepared that everything for them is lost. Of course, to face death will always be disconcerting, as we will be facing the ultimate reality of our life and the beginning of the world of the unknown. For that reason, death is frightening even to those who have faith in God. But one thing is to be afraid because we will die, and another is to be unprepared because we never thought about the possibility of death.

The merit of Pascal is to bring to our awareness the truth that whatever might be our life on earth and its beauty, we have one day to face the reality of death. For that reason, we have to be prepared for that moment. In fact, Pascal is not inviting us to live in fear because we will die, but rather to open our eyes by recognizing and accepting what is coming before us. We do not need to mask ourselves from the reality of death which can happen to us at anytime. Because we have to die, therefore, we have to consider all the things of this world in the limits of their appreciation as limited things which can stop one day.

There is a lot of wisdom in opening our eyes in considering the reality of death. When we do so, we give to our life on earth its true meaning as a transitory reality and a moment of grace God has given us in order to prepare us to live one day with him eternally in heaven. To think of the reality of death does not mean that we have to despise the things of this world as though they were less important. Everything of what we do in this world is important; otherwise God would not have given us all the possibilities we have. However, we should not forget that we are God's stewards who are enjoying his blessings in this world until the day we will give him an account of what we have done with his gifts.

The things of this world are important, but insofar as they help us to live in such a way that they eventually lead us to God. When we can live in this world, in spite of all the good things surrounding us, with a free spirit and a free mind, as free human beings, by preparing us every day to the final moment of the encounter with the Lord, we would have won the true battle of life. For the true battle of life comes to someone not when he is a prisoner of what he has built on earth, but when he is free, in spite of what he has built on earth. Then, he can leave everything behind him without regret or remorse with the conviction that here on earth we just are strangers and heaven is our true home (Hebrews 13: 14).

Once again, let us listen to Peter Kreeft commenting on Pascal. We are like ships that need to get home, sailing past a port that has signs on it proclaiming that it is our true home and our true happiness. The ships are our own lives and the signs on the port say "God". The agnostic says he will neither put in at that port (believe) nor turn away from it

(disbelieve) but stay anchored a reasonable distance away until the weather clears and he can see better whether this is the true port or a fake (for there are a lot of fakes around). Why is this attitude unreasonable, even impossible? Because we are moving. The ship of life is moving along the waters of time, and there comes a point of no return, when our fuel runs out, when it is too late.

c) The prevalence of eternal life over finite gains

Life is a long journey, made up of ups and downs, successes and failures, victories and defeats, etc. Each step of this journey, whether it is a defeat or victory, a failure or a success, is worth living as it allows us to deeply experience what it means to be human. In truth, every experience of life is as relevant as it is instructive. It teaches us something about human life and its demands we have to fulfill in order to truly live. From life experience, we can also learn that in spite of all our good will and expectations, it is not evident that life may always go in the sense of our wishes. As we succeed in some business, we may fail in others, but the journey continues until the last moment of our life.

While in time of victory we rejoice for our achievement, in time of defeat we ponder on what happened to us with the idea of doing better in the future and of correcting what went wrong in our enterprise. Never can a defeat or an unsuccessful attempt be an obstacle in our journey. The potential we have in us is such that we will always be driven by the impulse of starting again from where we have stumbled. Defeat or success is part of human experience and the journey of life.

It is within the prospect of victory and defeat, success and failure, that we build the dreams of our life. Those dreams are important and it would be detrimental to the growth of our personality along the way of life if one stops dreaming. Dreams canalize our efforts and enhance our energy so that we achieve what we want to be in life.

In order to fulfill those dreams we work hard and undertake many things by using the best of our skills and abilities in the conviction that those will contribute to the achievement of what we are hoping for. Thanks to the concurrence of circumstances and the strength of our hard work, our dreams can become reality and contribute to our happiness.

Everything of what we achieve this way is always legitimate and worthwhile. It is our right to enjoy the fruit of the work of our hands and to rejoice when our dreams are achieved. It remains an inalienable truth, however, that the happiness that comes out of the fulfillment of our dreams, whatever might be its extension and its enjoyment, is always fragile in so far as its foundation is not in God and in his Word.

The Wisdom we find in Holy Scripture teaches us that we have to consider the things we enjoy in this world, even those acquired through hard work, as God's gifts. There is no denial or minimization of our inner strength when we attribute to God what we have produced. On the contrary, it is a vivid awareness of our human limits and even a sign of a spiritual wisdom that we do so. For, according to the words of the psalmist, unless the Lord builds the house, those who build labor in vain; unless the Lord guard the city, in vain does the guard keep watch (Ps 127, 1). The logic behind these words is the recognition of the truth that everything is God's grace. Even where we have worked hard to attain success in our work, everything was possible only because God blessed us.

Another truth we cannot forget is that whoever bases his life on God is like a tree planted near streams of water that yields fruits in season; its leaves never wither and whatever comes out of such a one prospers (Ps 1, 3). It is in our interest and for our spiritual good, then, to bear the vicissitudes of life with God. When we wake up in the morning remembering God, when we spend the whole day working hard with him, and we go to sleep in the evening with his blessing, there is a surplus of strength that is given to us and of which only God is the author. That is what makes a difference in the lives of some people. They do know that without God their lives fall apart, but with him it is stable. They fulfill their duties in society and in the world with the conviction that God guides them and crowns the work of their hands, for according to the words of Isaiah, it is God who metes out peace to us and it is God who has accomplished what we have done (Is 26, 12).

If that is the case, then, it is meaningful and even legitimate that the things of God have prevalence in our life over the things of the world. The things of the earth, as a matter of fact, are limited to the satisfaction of our earthly and immediate needs. Their value

cannot lift us up beyond what is visible with our eyes, touchable with our hands and audible with our ears (1 Corinthians 2: 9-10). In that sense, the perspective they offer is limited to this world. The benefit they provide us, as important as it might be insofar as they allow us to enjoy life and to assume the demands of life's journey, is narrow.

To say that the benefit of the things of the world is narrow does not mean that they lose their relevance and importance. It means only that in comparison to the infinite value of eternal life, their gain is finite. That is what Blaise Pascal wants to tell us and to bring to our awareness. In fact, Pascal is not inviting us to reject the world and its values, but to use it with prudence, knowing well that what it offers is precarious with regard to life eternal. In that perspective, the world and its surrounding is not an absolute reality, but a preparative stage that has to lead us to eternal life.

This is a real challenge, because there is a strong temptation in each one of us, especially when someone has been successful in his life, to see the world and its attractions as an infinite reality. When such a perception is dominant in a journey of someone, it is clear that nothing else counts than the values of the world, like money, pleasures, material goods, etc. As God does not count, so heaven does not mean anything to him and eternal life is for him just a human illusion. Such is the vision of things which is prominent among the atheists and that is the perception that Blaise Pascal denounces.

Unlike such a temptation, we have always to remember these words of Jesus, "What good would it be for a man to gain the whole world if he loses his soul. Or what can one give in exchange for his life?" (Mathew 16: 26). According to these words of Jesus, the things of this world, so good as they are to us and to the satisfaction of our needs, should not take the first place in our life. Eternal life being the supreme good we have to fight for, we have to live on earth in such a way that we leave a little bit of room to God and to the values of his Kingdom. If we exhaust all our energy in search for the goods of this world, the time will come when we will realize that in spite of our success, we are the losers because we have lost the possibility of eternal life.

It is for that reason that Jesus insists that we are prudent in our life and our enterprise. The temptation of winning the whole world with its values and success while putting

ourselves in the position of losing our soul is risky and dangerous. Ignoring such truth is never good for us. Moreover, it is now that we are still on earth that we can make a good decision that will bring us to work for the things that endure eternally.

CONCLUSION

Life is complex and the journey it obliges us to do is more than unpredictable. Human experience has taught us that life is not only cruel, as the pessimist thinks, but it is also generous and full of possibilities. The vision of human wisdom, which crosses in many ways the insight of faith, invites us to hold both perceptions together tight without falling in the extreme of one or another.

If we keep the middle ground and the vision that what life offers us has to be appreciated in the limit of its usefulness, we cannot deify the things of this world. They are certainly valuable, but insofar as they allow us to live a decent life. But beyond all that, God is the foundation of everything.

That is what Blaise Pascal has tried to bring with his wager on the existence of God. In fact, Pascal wants us to understand that we cannot exclude God from our circle of life without that being prejudicial to our eternal happiness. Of course, we remain free human beings, capable of exercising our free will, but we have to use in a way that it contributes to the attainment of our eternal happiness.

It is here that Pascal's wager becomes enlightening. The truth is that, if God does not exist and we have done nothing for our relationship with him, we will never regret it. However, if he does exist and we have lived in such a way that we never took him seriously, we will certainly regret it. Perhaps the best way of avoiding one day this type of regret would be to opt for God while we are still alive on earth.

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