



## Blaise Pascal on “Why God is Hidden” and “The Wager”

*from Pascal’s Pensées*

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### Summary of Pascal’s Argument

Blaise Pascal addresses the issue of “if God is really out there, why is he so hidden? Why doesn’t he do more to reveal himself?” After addressing this, he lays down his famous “wager” argument.

Here are some excerpts and explanations from each stage.

#### Why is God Hidden?

430"God has willed to redeem men and to open salvation to those who seek it. But men render themselves so unworthy of it that it is right that God should refuse to some, because of their obduracy, what He grants others from a compassion which is not due to them. If He had willed to overcome the obstinacy of the most hardened, He could have done so by revealing Himself so manifestly to them that they could not have doubted of the truth of His essence; as it will appear at the last day, with such thunders and such a convulsion of nature that the dead will rise again, and the blindest will see Him." It is not in this manner that He has willed to appear in His advent of mercy, because, as so many make themselves unworthy of His mercy, He has willed to leave them in the loss of the good which they do not want. It was not, then, right that He should appear in a manner manifestly divine, and completely capable of convincing all men; but it was also not right that He should come in so hidden a manner that He could not be known by those who should sincerely seek Him. He has willed to make himself quite recognizable by those; and thus, willing to appear openly to those who seek Him with all their heart, and to be hidden from those who flee from Him with all their heart, He so regulates the knowledge of Himself that He has given signs of Himself, visible to those who seek Him, and not to those who seek Him not. There is enough light for those who only desire to see, and enough obscurity for those who have a contrary disposition."

We have just the right amount of light. The seekers can find him and yet remain humble. The wicked can retain their will against him. God does not give the apologist an argument so strong to convince the committed skeptic.

578. There is sufficient clearness to enlighten the elect, and sufficient obscurity to humble them. There is sufficient obscurity to blind the reprobate, and sufficient clearness to condemn them and make them inexcusable... *If God had permitted only one religion, it has been too easily known; but when we look at it closely, we clearly discern the truth amidst this confusion.*

The above is important for the wager Pascal lays out below. It is true there are many religions out there, but Pascal thinks once you look for the evidence behind them, the truth of the matter will be found. To sit back and do nothing will get you nowhere. God’s truth will not come to your front doorstep like an unordered Domino’s pizza. The truth is hidden when not sought after and Pascal relies especially on passages like this from the Gospel of Matthew:

"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives; and the one who seeks, finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened." (Mt 7:7-8)

### **The Wager**

One ought to be a seeker of religious truth – to not do so is foolish. Thus Pascal thinks the most foolish thing to do is to not-seek God. After all, he thinks there are only three kinds of people, those who believe and already have found God, those who do not believe but seek God – these types will eventually find him, and those who do not bother to seek at all. These last people will never find God in this lifetime and stand the possibility of losing everything in the end. This is the foundation for his “wager”. He argues that it is complete foolishness to be a not-seeker for we are all going to die, and nothing is gained by not-seeking. Even if you do not believe you should gamble that God (in the Christian sense) does exist because so much is at stake, namely your eternal destiny. A wise man, even when he is not sure, takes the option that affords the most likelihood of benefit. Pascal lays out the initial point:

233. Let us then examine this point, and say, "God is, or He is not." But to which side shall we incline? Reason can decide nothing here. There is an infinite chaos which separated us. A game is being played at the extremity of this infinite distance where heads or tails will turn up. What will you wager? According to reason, you can do neither the one thing nor the other; according to reason, you can defend neither of the propositions.

Pascal anticipates an initial objection by saying that a choice of agnosticism is really impossible. Being non-committal about God unto death is no different than atheism. Saying “maybe God, maybe” until you die, practically results in a “no”. Agnosticism until death is in practice the same as atheism. So one must wager either for or against God. You must wager because you are already embarked on the journey of life that will end in death:

Do not, then, reprove for error those who have made a choice; for you know nothing about it. "No, but I blame them for having made, not this choice, but a choice; for again both he who chooses heads and he who chooses tails are equally at fault, they are both in the wrong. The true course is not to wager at all."

Yes; but you must wager. It is not optional. You are embarked. Which will you choose then? Let us see. Since you must choose, let us see which interests you least. You have two things to lose, the true and the good; and two things to stake, your reason and your will, your knowledge and your happiness; and your nature has two things to shun, error and misery. Your reason is no more shocked in choosing one rather than the other, since you must of necessity choose. This is one point settled. But your happiness? Let us weigh the gain and the loss in wagering that God is. Let us estimate these two chances. If you gain, you gain all; if you lose, you lose nothing. Wager, then, without hesitation that He is. "That is very fine. Yes, I must wager; but I may perhaps wager too much." Let us see. Since there is an equal risk of gain and of loss, if you had only to gain two lives, instead of one, you might still wager. But if there were three lives to gain, you would have to play (since you are under the necessity of playing), and you would be imprudent, when you are forced to play, not to chance your life to gain three at a game where there is an equal risk of loss and gain. But there is an eternity of life and happiness. And this being so, if there were an infinity of chances, of which one only would be for you, you would still be right in wagering one to win two, and you would act stupidly, being obliged to

play, by refusing to stake one life against three at a game in which out of an infinity of chances there is one for you, if there were an infinity of an infinitely happy life to gain. But there is here an infinity of an infinitely happy life to gain, a chance of gain against a finite number of chances of loss, and what you stake is finite. It is all divided; where-ever the infinite is and there is not an infinity of chances of loss against that of gain, there is no time to hesitate, you must give all. And thus, when one is forced to play, he must renounce reason to preserve his life, rather than risk it for infinite gain, as likely to happen as the loss of nothingness.

For it is no use to say it is uncertain if we will gain, and it is certain that we risk, and that the infinite distance between the certainly of what is staked and the uncertainty of what will be gained, equals the finite good which is certainly staked against the uncertain infinite. It is not so, as every gambler stakes a certainty to gain an uncertainty, and yet he stakes a finite certainty to gain a finite uncertainty, without transgressing against reason. There is not an infinite distance between the certainty staked and the uncertainty of the gain; that is untrue. In truth, there is an infinity between the certainty of gain and the certainty of loss. But the uncertainty of the gain is proportioned to the certainty of the stake according to the proportion of the chances of gain and loss. Hence it comes that, if there are as many risks on one side as on the other, the course is to play even; and then the certainty of the stake is equal to the uncertainty of the gain, so far is it from fact that there is an infinite distance between them. And so our proposition is of infinite force, when there is the finite to stake in a game where there are equal risks of gain and of loss, and the infinite to gain. This is demonstrable; and if men are capable of any truths, this is one.

	God exists	God does not exist
You believe	Infinite gain	No loss
You do not believe	Infinite loss	No gain

Pascal argues that the believer has everything to gain and nothing to lose. The case for the atheist is just the opposite, everything to lose and nothing to gain. Thus, Pascal thinks atheism is the most foolish option one can take. For who in their right mind who opt for an option by which you gain nothing and stand to lose everything?

Pascal anticipates another objection - How can one “fake” their belief when deep down they really do not believe?

"Yes, but I have my hands tied and my mouth closed; I am forced to wager, and am not free. I am not released, and am so made that I cannot believe. What, then, would you have me do?"

True. But at least learn your inability to believe, since reason brings you to this, and yet you cannot believe. Endeavor, then, to convince yourself, not by increase of proofs of God, but by the abatement of your passions. You would like to attain faith and do not know the way; you would like to cure yourself of unbelief and ask the remedy for it. Learn of those who have been bound like you, and who now stake all their possessions. These are people who know the way which you would follow, and who are cured of an ill of which you would be cured. Follow the way by which they began; by acting as if they believed, taking the holy water, having masses said, etc. Even this will naturally make you believe, and deaden your acuteness. "But this is what I am afraid of." And why? What have you to lose?  
 --But to show you that this leads you there, it is this which will lessen the passions, which are your stumbling-blocks.

Now, what harm will befall you in taking this side? You will be faithful, humble, grateful, generous, a sincere friend, truthful. Certainly you will not have those poisonous pleasures, glory and luxury; but will you not have others? I will tell you that you will thereby gain in this life, and that, at each step you take on this road, you will see so great certainty of gain, so much nothingness in what you risk, that you will at last recognize that you have wagered for something certain and infinite, for which you have given nothing

Another objection – But suppose one says they can only act on certainty?

234. If we must not act save on a certainty, we ought not to act on religion, for it is not certain. But how many things we do on an uncertainty, sea voyages, battles! I say then we must do nothing at all, for nothing is certain, and that there is more certainty in religion than there is as to whether we may see to-morrow; for it is not certain that we may see to-morrow, and it is certainly possible that we may not, see it. We cannot say as much about religion. It is not certain that it is; but who will venture to say that it is certainly possible that it is not? Now when we work for to-morrow, and so on an uncertainty, we act reasonably...

Another objection – “If God wanted me to believe he would have told me so clearly.”

236. According to the doctrine of chance, you ought to put yourself to the trouble of searching for the truth; for if you die without worshipping the True Cause, you are lost. "But," say you, "if He had wished me to worship Him, He would have left me signs of His will." He has done so; but you neglect them. Seek them, therefore; it is well worth it [...]

We must live differently in the world, according to these different assumptions: (1) that we could always remain in it; (2) that it is certain that we shall not remain here long, and uncertain if we shall remain here one hour. This last assumption is our condition.

Pascal addresses two final objections

239. Objection. -- Those who hope for salvation are so far happy; but they have as a counterpoise the fear of hell.

-- Reply.- Who has most reason to fear hell: he who is in ignorance whether there is a hell, and who is certain of damnation if there is; or he who certainly believes there is a hell and hopes to be saved if there is?

240. "I would soon have renounced pleasure," say they, "had I faith." For my part I tell you, "You would soon have faith, if you renounced pleasure." Now, it is for you to begin. If I could, I would give you faith. I cannot do so, nor therefore test the truth of what you say. But you can well renounce pleasure and test whether what I say is true.

241. I would have far more fear of being mistaken, and of finding that the Christian religion was true, than of not being mistaken in believing it true.

**Some More Recent Objections:**

**“Pascal is just trying to motivate people out of fear.”**

Yes, fear is precisely the motivation to which Pascal’s argument appeals but he would likely claim that while fear is not the end; it is an excellent starting point. After all, he is only being Biblical. Old Testament writers praise without hesitation that fear of God which is really "the beginning of wisdom" (Ps. cx). Fear of the Lord is the beginning of

wisdom (Prov 1:7). A very common concept in the Hebrew scriptures is the "exhortation to the fear of the Lord" (Ecclus., i, 13; ii, 19 sqq.). We are told that "without fear there is no justification" (ibid, i, 28; ii, 1; ii, 19). In this fear there is confidence of strength" and it is "fountain of life" (Prov, xiv, 26, 27); and the Psalmist prays (Ps. cxviii, 120): "Pierce thou my flesh with thy fear: for I am afraid of thy judgments." In the New Testament, Christ does not hesitate to say that we must "fear him who can destroy both soul and body into hell" (Matt., x, 28). Paul exhorts us to work out "our salvation in fear and trembling" lest the anger of God come upon us (Phil., ii, 12).

**“Pascal doesn’t take into account that there might be a God who will reward atheists and punish believers”**

On the contrary, Pascal does take this into account at when he says seekers of the true God will find him because God has left a sufficient amount of evidence to convince the honest, open-minded inquirer. This evidence Pascal thinks is sufficient to rule out rival religious claims, and that is precisely what this objection is, a religious claim. For think about it, this objection really is not truly atheistic, but a veiled sort of theism because the objector is making a claim of the possible existence of a God who rewards only atheists, which presupposes not only God’s existence but also some knowledge of his nature. So unlike all other atheistic objections to theistic arguments, the ubiquity of this response reveals that the atheist cannot nip the argument in the bud before it advances to a relatively advanced stage of positing at least “some” god. But this response plays right into Pascal’s hands. *One ought to be a seeker of religious truth* and now, by the atheist’s response, the search is on. But assuming the objector’s lifestyle remains atheistic in that he does not pray and things of this sort, then he reveals his tacit acceptance of belief in a “worship-hating God”. Pascal can now attack the rationality of this acceptance the same way he handles other various religious claims; viz., by simply weighing the miracle claims, fulfilled prophecy of Christianity, etc. against any alleged evidence of this “worship-hating God”. If however the atheist denies this acceptance, then the dilemma of the original wager is back on again!

So either the atheist has to come up with a better objection to the wager or the atheist is forced in the paradoxical position of defending an uncanny form of theism!<sup>1</sup>

Thus, Pascal’s argument can be summarized in two steps

- 1) The wager: atheism is a foolish option
- 2) Therefore, one should be a seeker of religious truth

When 2 is reached, Pascal thinks Christianity will win hands down

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<sup>1</sup> Remember that Pascal has already ruled out agnosticism as an option.