



Pascal's Wager Today: Belief and the Gift of Existence

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Abstract

The enduring value of the Pascal's Wager is that, bypassing intractable debates over God's existence, it brings the question of God into a practical, existential focus. This essay seeks to re-examine this famous Wager for its possible application to the current context of widespread agnosticism and increasingly assertive atheism. The essay argues that if rightly contextualised the Wager reminds people to seriously address their need for meaningful commitments and to confront their mortality. Rather than focusing on winning and losing in the afterlife, the Wager in our modern context can serve to highlight how human life is structured according to meaning, giftedness and relationality. Revealing the gifted and finite nature of existence provides grounds for a discussion of ultimate meaning and God.

This essay examines the merits of Pascal's thought for the modern context. Pascal's Wager is designed to appeal to half-hearted believers, agnostics and atheists, and so could be relevant to the seemingly post-Christian phase of Western culture. The value of the Wager is that it re-focuses discussions about God in their proper context: in the context of our lives and existence. In this sense, there is a practical intuition behind Pascal's thought: that all people must commit their lives to a direction and *telos*, that belief in God is an exercise of the will in the search for the truth and *telos* of existence, and that non-belief can manifest a failure in desire and imagination. The essay firstly outlines a way of understanding the Wager within an existential context, highlighting Pascal's motivations for the Wager. Secondly, some critiques of the Wager are addressed. Thirdly, the essay shows how the Wager provides grounds for contemplating existence as contingent and gifted, forming the basis for a dialogue with such scholars as Herbert McCabe and Rowan Williams. Finally, the essay highlights the practical implications of the Wager.

The Existential Context: Then and Now

In constructing his Wager, Pascal is re-orienting the debate about God's existence to the existential context of human life. Pascal is fundamentally concerned with the choice that confronts all humans: "either God is or he is not."¹ This is a choice that constantly confronts humans, but is most pressing when death and mortality are confronted. Pascal wishes for the urgency of this question to be felt in its personal implications, rather than in abstract debates. Pascal is not primarily interested in the "God" question for abstract purposes because he argues that "reason cannot decide this question"²; instead he is interested in the question for what it tells us about the meaning and purpose of human life. He emphasises the immediacy of the question by asking it in the context of death; in modern terminology, we might ask "What if you died tomorrow? How would your current thinking about life and God be changed?" Pascal wishes to jolt the apathetic into serious contemplation. Pascal is somewhat concerned with the calculations of wagering, because in the end, one must take a risk and commit oneself to a certain path: God or not. This wagering must be put in the perspective of his over-riding concern with the human search for *telos*, truth and God. His wagering is a means of making a larger argument about the importance of contemplating God in one's life, particularly as that contemplation leads one to see how the *telos* of the finite human being is in an infinite God.³

Pascal emphasises that all humans are concerned with the search for the truth and happiness of their lives. It is the truth and end of life that informs our everyday actions and provides the context for our decisions and identities. This search occurs with the knowledge that all humans will die, and perhaps even live on beyond death. Thus, Pascal is concerned to show that humans must contemplate the final end of their lives – what the purpose of life is and what it will amount to after death.⁴ This task is particularly important

¹ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1966), p. 150 (no. 418); Cf. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées and Other Writings*, trans. Honor Levi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 152–8 (no. 680).

² Pascal, *Pensées*, p. 150 (418). Pascal further argues that Christians should not be condemned for not offering rational proofs for God because God is infinitely beyond comprehension and to offer such proofs would be to neglect this fact (making God reducible to reason), while also contradicting the experience of God's absence in the world (because, according to Christian understanding, God is infinite being outside finite existence, making finite existence possible).

³ Following Pascal's logic of wagering can be difficult in sections, though his aim seems to be to emphasise the logic of infinity: that all is to be gained with an infinite God, even if the chances are small. In other words, the end of a finite human being can only be truly satisfied in an infinite God. Cf. Alan Hájek, "Pascal's Wager", *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 6 Nov 2012, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/pascal-wager/>.

⁴ Pascal, *Pensées*, pp. 156–164 (427–31).

because of the nature of finite human living in which “there is no true and solid satisfaction” and death threatens us with annihilation or wretchedness. A human who does not do so is unreasonable, living from moment to moment, satisfied with finite things (to some degree) but neglecting the possibility of greater realities beyond the finite. In the following passage, Pascal expounds the thoughts of the indifferent person, who begins his musings with the questions that all humans face and concludes in a somewhat similar fashion to the modern person; Pascal finishes with poignant criticism:

“I do not know who put me into this world, nor what the world is, nor what I am myself.

... All I know is that I must shortly die, but what I know least about is death itself, which I cannot avoid.

In the same way that I do not know where I came from, neither do I know where I am going, and I know only that on leaving this world I either fall into nothingness for ever, or into the hands of an angry God, without knowing which of these two states will be my condition in eternity. Such is my state, full of weakness and uncertainty. And I conclude from all this that I must spend every day of my life without thinking of enquiring into what will happen to me. I could perhaps find some enlightenment among my doubts, but I do not want to take the trouble to do so, nor take one step to look for it. And afterwards, sneering at those who are struggling with the task, I will go without forethought or fear to face the great venture, and allow myself to be carried tamely to my death, uncertain as to the eternity of my future state.”

Who would wish to have as a friend a man who talked like that? Who would choose him among others in whom to confide his affairs? Who would turn to him in adversity?

And finally, to what purpose in life could he be put?⁵

For Pascal, a reasonable human being will genuinely and honestly search to discover the meaning and purpose of life, with regard to its end and to the event of death.⁶ He is most critical of those who are indifferent or disingenuous about this search for truth, while he expresses compassion for those who authentically search but deeply struggle with belief and doubt.⁷ This search, according to Pascal, requires the investment of our whole person, just as the Wager

⁵ Pascal, *Pensées and Other Writings*, pp. 160–1 (681). Cf. Pascal, *Pensées*, pp. 157–8 (427). It is interesting to note that the indifferent person formulates the question in terms of nothingness or an angry God. It seems that the conception of God, which I will discuss later in the essay, influences how one views the question of life and death.

⁶ Pascal, *Pensées*, p. 156 (427).

⁷ Pascal, *Pensées*, pp. 156–162 (427).

implicitly shows that life is a *risk* that involves a fundamental *choice* about how we invest our life in the pursuit of happiness and truth. Living means undertaking this search and making a commitment, which is why Pascal argues that one must make a wager: human life is unavoidably structured by meaning and purpose and requires us to make a decision about its direction. In this way, we are constantly deciding on what human life means and how to act in terms of our ultimate end in happiness. For Pascal, this search for true happiness is defined by our nature as free, relational and immortal beings. This nature leads humans to confront the Wager for or against God. The Wager expresses our freedom to relate with that Being who makes our being possible, even beyond death, and makes sense of our finite living and yearnings.

Pascal's wager analogy amounts to a plea to take life seriously. That means cultivating a sense of ultimate fulfilment, facing the inevitabilities of suffering and death, and overcoming indifference and self-centredness.⁸ Pascal wishes to stir the indifferent and unbelieving into the practical consideration of meaning and purpose.⁹ The Wager assumes that humans beings are unique creatures of reason and will who, unlike the rest of nature, have no clear and discernible end or purpose for their lives. To be human is to feel the need for further fulfilment, for an all-fulfilling destiny, even an infinite one, particularly through the ability to freely relate with God. For almost all human cultures, there has been an intuition that life comes from somewhere beyond the human realm and moves to a certain end – we sense this in the fact that we do not create ourselves and in the way that we constantly undertake activities (which are directed to an end) to gain greater amounts of happiness.¹⁰

Therefore, the most fundamental yearnings and questions – where do I come from, who I am, where am I going, why do I exist, why evil and who is the other to me – must be addressed by each human in some form, in order to pursue activities that lead to happiness. Faith in the ordinary or natural sense is the way we answer these basic questions of life. We form answers to the basic questions of our lives that give direction and meaning to our lives. These answers

⁸ Pascal's Wager is criticised for its vulgar appeal to self-interest to stimulate belief in God, yet it is important to note how Pascal contextualises the Wager as involving an authentic search for truth and purpose by a being with an immortal soul. Cf. Hájek, "Pascal's Wager".

⁹ Denying purpose, as Richard Dawkins and others do, is problematic. One ends up making contradictory statements like: the truth is that there is no truth; or, the purpose of life is that there is no purpose. Each makes a claim about truth and purpose, though in a negative way. To deny purpose is to deny the very nature of our actions and our living – because we naturally seek the good that contributes to our fulfilment.

¹⁰ In relation to ethical activity, see Henry B. Veatch, *Rational man: a modern interpretation of Aristotelian ethics* (Bloomington, ID: Indiana University Press, 1962).

are formed as beliefs, not as empirical or scientific facts, but as something we hold deeply and which motivate us to live and act.¹¹

Thus, one must believe in some sort of meaning and purpose in order to live, and to do this, one must make a judgement about life. This judgement, according to Pascal, includes the question of God, and is even most fundamentally expressed in relation to God – to that which is beyond the finite world and on which the finite world is dependent for its own existence. In other words, the question of why we exist, and the meaning and purpose of existence, implies that we must undertake a genuine search and commitment in which we must take a stand, stake our life, and by so doing, have some possibility for living a meaningful and happy life.¹² To do otherwise, for Pascal, is to not live up to what life is, to neglect its full potential, meaning and purpose, and thus be unreasonable. Thus, we must wager: there is either something beyond this finite life which guarantees our ultimate happiness – that this something created us and intended us for more than the finite – or there is not. We are made for infinity, or not.

The Wager and its Critics

It is in the context of the practical implications of finite existence that Pascal argues that we must wager our life and we must do so with death in mind. For Pascal, the choice is stark: we are either created by God or not (because we are finite and do not create ourselves); and moreover, our life after death will be with God, or not. Thus, either we live committed to God with faith, or we explicitly reject or implicitly neglect God. This choice will determine how we live in this life and our fate after death. For Pascal, on one level, the choice is simple: making a choice for God gives the possibility for an infinite life of happiness and it would not only be unreasonable to reject this possibility, but it would also frustrate our deepest yearnings.¹³ To accept God's existence is a reasonable wager as one gains everything beyond death, while losing nothing.¹⁴

¹¹ Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, trans. J.R. Foster (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1990), pp. 15–49.

¹² It is interesting to note that in a recent study, Andrew Hodge concluded that those who contemplate the meaning of life within the context of religious belief are happier than those who do not. Cf. Andrew Hodge, *Happiness, Philosophy and Economics*, PhD Thesis (Brisbane, Aus: The University of Queensland, 2012).

¹³ While Pascal argues that we cannot know God in his nature, he critiques other beliefs in God (e.g., paganism, Islam) and argues that Christianity is the most reasonable in terms of its end (an infinitely loving God) and the means to achieving this end. Cf. "Pascal's Wager", *Wikipedia*, 28 May 2013, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pascal%27s_Wager.

¹⁴ A critique of this argument is that if God does not exist, one does lose truth; in other words, what one believed to be true – namely, God's existence – is not true if the

However, Pascal has been criticised for arguing for belief in something (namely, God) on the grounds of the benefits it offers, rather than on the grounds of its inherent logic, truth or reasonableness.¹⁵ In a way Pascal leaves himself open to this critique, though this critique stands if one misunderstands the context from which Pascal is working. He is arguing that God's existence offers a framework for understanding and living finite human life (and confronting death) – not motivated by selfish interest in utility but by enlightened self-examination in the *telos* of life. It is an argument grounded in the nature of human life as free, finite and meaningful, which means that humans must make an effort to posit the purpose for their existence, not ultimately for gain but to provide a context for their actions in order to live any kind of meaningful or happy life. For Pascal, the choice is clear – between God or nothing – and in making a correct choice, the most fundamental existential framework is available to us – to recognise God gives a full and proper context to our finite life and death. It is this choice that makes sense of our purpose and final end: an infinite being is either responsible for the finite world or not, and so, our life and its yearnings and end relies on this infinite being (or not). Our will and reason should be able to confront this choice, and the framework it offers, to make sense of life and what lies beyond death.

Furthermore, to wager on the side of God only for selfish reasons (e.g., to survive beyond death) may provide a starting point for relationship with God, though if it does not mature beyond self-interest, its real roots eventually takeover. This kind of disposition – that professes belief in God in order to avoid death or gain eternal life, without any genuine contemplation of life or commitment to God – belies a self-enclosed disposition, against which Pascal is arguing. This kind of disposition can rarely be maintained throughout the whole of one's life; sufferings or smaller pleasures emerge that inevitably divert the purely self-interested individual, whose real allegiance is to himself. In certain moments of opportunity or hardship, what the self-interested individual truly desires will be revealed (as self-interest is always driven by some criterion or desire). This selfish desire provides his real motivation, unless this motivation can be transcended as he begins to open himself to God out of fear of death. Despite the influence of self-interest, the larger problem in regards to the Wager, according to Pascal, is indifference: instead of making

wager is lost (Cf. Hájek, "Pascal's Wager"). Nevertheless, Pascal's emphasis seems to be existential here – if God does exist, purpose and infinity are gained, while if God does not exist, all is lost. Nevertheless, there is a problem that forcing oneself to believe in God can mean one loses one's existential and intellectual authenticity. I return to this problem later in the essay.

¹⁵ "Pascal's Wager", *Wikipedia*.

a selfish wager, most people are apathetic to the larger context of life and to the genuine search for truth (which on some level, the self-interested individual shares in common with the indifferent person). Pascal tries to remedy this problem by formulating the Wager to clarify the fundamental choice that humans face as they construct frameworks of meaning and purpose.¹⁶

The Meaning of Existence and God

Thus, Pascal's Wager seeks to clarify a proper context for finite life: for desiring truth and understanding life in the context of infinite being. Infinity is argued to be fundamental for living a finite life; it is the source and end of finite life (which is endowed with "the immortality of the soul", as Pascal emphasised), even and especially for finite life that has gone astray in evil, idolatry and distorted desire. Therefore, what is being imagined when we speak of God is a context for our finite lives: a context that makes sense of the origin, meaning and purpose of our existence; of "why there is anything rather than nothing."¹⁷ In other words, when all our 'scientific questions' are finished, we still need to come to terms with the reality of existence and why we exist at all. As Wittgenstein remarked:

"To believe in God means to understand the question about the meaning of life.

To believe in God means to see that the facts of the world are not the end of the matter.

To believe in God means to see that life has a meaning."¹⁸

Wittgenstein seems to aptly sum up Pascal's aim in formulating the Wager as an act of meaning and existential purpose. Thus, what we lose when we stop speaking of God is not some finite system of reward and punishment (an angry God), but a way of coming to terms with our lives and who we are as human beings, both in terms of what to desire and how to understand our lives, in the context of a radically relational existence. As mentioned, there is a deep intuition underlying Pascal's Wager that is associated with belief in God: that we are not responsible for our existence – that we did not and do not cause our lives "to be" and that we have no real control over whether and how we exist (in essence). Finitude (endowed with reason) is why

¹⁶ Pascal, *Pensées*, pp. 155–164 (427–31).

¹⁷ Herbert McCabe, *God Matters* (London and New York: Continuum, 1987), p. 6.

¹⁸ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Notebooks 1914–16*, ed. G. H. von Wright and G. E. M. Anscombe, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Harper, 1961), Journal entry (8 July 1916), p. 74e.

humans are moved to think or call out to God in certain experiences such as when we feel need, loneliness, pain, fortune, abundance and joy.¹⁹ In these experiences, we confront and recognise our finiteness and how we are dependent on factors and relationships greater than ourselves for our happiness and survival.²⁰ Without negating our freedom and agency, this recognition of finiteness ultimately can move beyond momentary or chance experiences to the deepest level of being – to the recognition of the essential giftedness of existence, which gives rise to our relational identity and our need for the Other to nurture this identity in love.

Thus, the Wager leads one to contemplate the essentially *gifted* nature of existence, which is proposed as a healthy foundation for our relational identity. This intuition about giftedness and the struggle with human finitude has pervaded human cultures. It has even resulted in the view that humans *discover*, not make, the parameters of existence²¹; and that there is something or someone – outside of our conventional world – who causes our lives to exist and on whom its nature and meaning is dependent. In a philosophical sense, this intuition has been formulated as an argument for God being “necessary”, the “first cause” and “uncaused” – as the one who is outside of time and space causing the universe to be (because nothing in time and space could logically do so).

Like Pascal, Herbert McCabe regards discussion of God's existence as having more than abstract implications, but is part of the task of radical questioning, which is an aspect of ordinary “intellectual activity”.²² McCabe claims that seeking to prove the existence of God is like proving the validity of certain questions which are posed by the existence of the universe.²³ The contemplation of these questions is part of a healthy intellectual life and engagement with the context of living; in other words, they are part of a healthy interest in one's own personal existence and one's desire to contemplate this existence. Yet, some reject the notion that we can ask questions of meaning about existence; that we can ask “why”. McCabe argues that the radical questioning of the universe is often discouraged by societies that *believe* they have all the answers, such as by those who *believe* that

¹⁹ Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, pp. 67–72.

²⁰ The Australian swimmer and three-time Olympic gold medallist, Stephanie Rice, expresses this experience succinctly: “There is just someone out there who looks out for you. I always ask for help and guidance before meets [swimming competitions], and make a habit of going to church before a meet to pray for help and guidance” (Brigid Delaney, “Stephanie Rice 3.0: swimming star grows up”, *The Age*, 2 July 2012, <http://www.theage.com.au/olympics/swimming-london-2012/stephanie-rice-30-swimming-star-grows-up-20120702-21c5u.html>).

²¹ Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, pp. 39–46.

²² McCabe, *God Matters*, p. 2.

²³ McCabe, *God Matters*, p. 2.

science will answer all questions.²⁴ This seems to be a peculiar and arbitrary act of censorship. The very foundation and motivation for our living is constantly concerned with “why” we exist. Children ask the question of “why” constantly in different ways; adolescents and young adults go through great anguish trying to make sense of their own lives; and adults must ask it when undertaking any moral action and when coming to terms with their mortality. McCabe argues that asking radical questions about the world is part of human flourishing.²⁵ This questioning of the universe that leads to a discussion of God is more radical than any other form of questioning, such as in the sciences, because, as Wittgenstein says: “Not *how* the world is, but *that* it is, is the mystery”.²⁶

McCabe demonstrates the type of radical questioning about which he is talking by showing how far the question “how come” (or “why”) can be asked.²⁷ McCabe shows the different levels that this question can be asked until one comes to the final and most radical level of this question: how come something exists “*rather than nothing*”.²⁸ McCabe calls this radical question the “God-question” because “whatever the answer is”, we call it “God”.²⁹ To be a genuine atheist, then, is not fundamentally about rejecting religious beliefs about God.³⁰ According to McCabe, a genuine atheist does not recognise the mystery in existence and refuses to ask the God-question.³¹ Similarly, Pascal argues that the problem in this debate is located in the search, not in the answers – for it is in a genuine search for truth in the midst of mystery that God and happiness emerge.

Furthermore, in asking this radical question, Rowan Williams explains that the language about God seeks to make sense of the world “as a single whole.”³² In treating the world in this way, one resists the unnecessary fragmentation of existence into its parts and categories, which in its worst form can lead one to obscure nature and circle around it.³³ In asking the question of existence, we are treating our lives as we usually experience them: as reasonable, integrated wholes,

²⁴ McCabe, *God Matters*, pp. 2–3.

²⁵ McCabe, *God Matters*, p. 3.

²⁶ McCabe, *God Matters*, p. 5.

²⁷ McCabe, *God Matters*, pp. 3–5.

²⁸ McCabe, *God Matters*, p. 5.

²⁹ McCabe, *God Matters*, p. 5.

³⁰ McCabe, *God Matters*, p. 7.

³¹ McCabe, *God Matters*, p. 7. McCabe acknowledges that while asking this question is to stretch our language beyond its capacity into areas humans do not fully comprehend, it is still necessary for us to contemplate the mystery of existence and infinity.

³² Rowan Williams, *Tokens of Trust* (Louisville, KY, and London, UK: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), p. 32.

³³ Cf. Gil Bailie, *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads* (New York: Crossroad, 1995), pp. 234–59.

on the basis of which we are trying to build a happy and meaningful life. We rarely experience our lives as completely fragmented or fractured. We experience the effects of some fragmentation but we usually seek or tend toward flourishing, happiness and wholeness, that is, towards life's *telos*.

Thus, while God-language may have limited appeal, Williams claims that humans have an intuitive sense, supported by scientific inquiry, that it is fair to ask where the universe comes from and how it remains "a bounded, self-consistent, interdependent system."³⁴ To speak of God in this context is not to posit a higher being that sits alongside the universe and leaves it to its own devices, but is to speak of "an activity" that causes all things and is "its own 'cause,' eternal and unchanging."³⁵ For example, much like the electric current in a light bulb, God's loving presence continually keeps creation in being.³⁶ This view of God presents no conflict between religion and science as is not a scientific theory about how the universe started, but provides a necessary context to understand our life in a finite universe.³⁷

The Implications: God and the Existential Imagination

God, then, is not just an "interesting" or abstract idea³⁸ but a necessary and important way of engaging with the fact and meaning of existence. Yet, the intuition that human cultures universally have had about existence and a transcendent being(s) has not been formulated for most people in abstract, philosophical ways. On the contrary, human cultures have formulated stories about God/gods and humans (e.g., in myths and the Bible). These stories try to imagine the meaning and purpose of existence based on the experience of existence itself and the wisdom that arises from openness to existence as a, or rather, *the* question. Stories are always most engaging for humans because we are beings of imagination and meaning trying to come to terms with who we are, in relationship with others. In inspiring and meaningful ways, stories give us a *desire* to live our life and live it in a certain way.

For this reason, talking about God (especially in stories) must be convincing – not just rationally (in philosophy), but existentially (in terms of experience and meaning). Imagining God in our lives means

³⁴ Williams, *Tokens of Trust*, p. 33.

³⁵ Williams, *Tokens of Trust*, pp. 33–34.

³⁶ Williams, *Tokens of Trust*, p. 35.

³⁷ Williams, *Tokens of Trust*, p. 37.

³⁸ Cf. Damon Young, "Is God interesting?", *ABC The Drum*, 27 July 2012, <http://www.abc.net.au/unleashed/4156730.html>.

being able to understand that something – or more properly, some one (whoever or whatever it is) – makes life possible by *gifting* it. This gift does not seem to be an arbitrary act of power (for the Creator does not impose himself on creation, but allows existence to have freedom, predictability and stability), but seems to be a gift of freedom to discover the possibilities of existence and our own identity.

As discussed, the imaginative alternative to God is atheism. In this sense, we are not talking about atheists or agnostics of goodwill who struggle with God-talk but who have some sense of transcendent meaning. We are talking about the nihilistic atheism that argues that there is no lasting significance to our lives; that existence begins, ends and leads to nothingness.³⁹ By arguing God does not exist, this kind of nihilism is really arguing for humans to give up trying to understand their contingent existence: that there is nothing that causes human existence or gives it transcendent meaning; and, that there is no real purpose or end to life, except that of power, despair or paper-thin cheerfulness about the absence of meaning that arguably does not do justice to the question of our existence.

Nihilistic atheism can try to cover over its position by stating that we should just value life for what it is and enjoy it. Yet, what is life? How can we understand and enjoy life, as imaginative and rational beings, if we cannot know its source, purpose and context? This atheistic attitude is disingenuous for it implicitly proposes an answer to these questions – by arguing for immanent responses – while seeking to deny theistic responses. This kind of nihilism goes against our own deepest intuition and experience. Existence does not lead to nothingness – otherwise, why we would live it? – but is alive with possibility and yearns for infinity.

To wager on the side of God, then, is to wager with possibility and infinity: that by opening our finite lives to the infinite possibility of existence and God, we gain more than we could hope. In it, we gain an ability to understand our contingent lives as well as a way into its infinite possibilities by recognising the giftedness of existence. Existence can be seen to not just start and end with nothing (how can something come from nothing?⁴⁰), but leads to more life; in fact, it leads to an infinite life with the one who created it, if we accept it.

Nevertheless, while belief in God could provide a context to existence, Williams argues that the problem of evil poses serious

³⁹ Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, *Values in a Time of Upheaval*, trans. B. McNeil (New York, NY: Crossroad Publishing and San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2006), pp. 47–8; Cf. R. Spaemann, “La perle précieuse et le nihilisme banal,” *Catholica* 33 (1992), pp. 43–50.

⁴⁰ Antony Flew, *There is a God: How the World's Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2007), pp. 133–45.

questions to the theistic view of God. Rejecting a Gnostic view that would place responsibility for evil on lesser “gods”, Williams argues that all things in creation are of concern to God. While the problem of evil presents the difficulties and sufferings of life that should not be made light of, it also shows to us a world that is risky and different from God. God does not place a perpetual safety net on the world but allows it to function in freedom, which means that there can be natural and human-made evils that affect life. Williams argues that if “God is really *serious* about making a world”, he would put all of his life into it that he possibly could while not pulling it into himself.⁴¹ This marks the difference between a pantheistic view of God that sees all the parts of creation as just part of God and a monotheistic, Christian view of God that sees creation as caused by God but given freedom and difference to relate with God. Thus, the riskiness of creation allows for beings of freedom and intelligence to develop, who image God and who can trust, plan and act in the world but who cannot control or make it. The integrity and uncontrollability of creation leaves ultimate control to God, who can be trusted to be bringing it to some final end in relationship with him. According to Williams, the implication is that the world deserves our respect as it is a gift, in a free relationship with God, and that even in the midst of evil and pain, this relationship with God can be witnessed to through trust.

Thus, creation can move according to or against God’s final end, according to its own freedom, intelligence and will. Williams concludes that belief in God helps to make sense of creation and offers “the possibility of an *integrated* life” where all parts of our disunited, fragmentary identities and world are being worked out and brought to fulfilment by God with the trust of his creation.⁴² The contemplation of God, therefore, is part of seeking a fully actualised life, which requires more than reason alone. In other words, as Pascal indicated, the Wager of existence recognises that human life requires *relationship with God*, which leads to certain patterns of desiring, acting and understanding that assist in fulfilling our deepest yearnings.⁴³

Conclusion

Thus, if we wager rightly, we can freely and fully take up the offer of existence as gift. Pascal asks us to place our faith – that is, to place

⁴¹ Williams, *Tokens of Trust*, pp. 42–3.

⁴² Williams, *Tokens of Trust*, p. 54.

⁴³ This is why Pascal recommends that doubters and unbelievers continue to seek the truth and try to undertake the practices of belief, so to become accustomed to life with God and develop a desire and understanding for it that could make sense of their lives.

our whole selves in trust – in existence itself, and so in God; that life *does* lead somewhere – to the infinite possibilities of giftedness and love which are inscribed in existence itself and for which we yearn deep down. To wager on God is to recognise that we are creatures of giftedness – that we have been given existence by someone for a purpose. Losing the Wager means giving up these possibilities – it means losing sight of the giftedness of existence and the fullness of loving relationship between humans and their creator that comes with this gift. It is this emphasis on finitude, meaning, giftedness and relationality that, if deployed well, the Wager can provoke. The Wager on its own is no guarantee of conversion, but if placed in the context of an existential exploration of the nature of human life, then the Wager can bear fruit. The elements of losing and winning in the afterlife, however, are not so palatable to the modern mind. These elements should not be emphasised. Rather, the emphasis of the Wager in the modern context can be placed on the need for critical and meaningful existential commitments, particularly as we confront the fact of our death and the associated contingency and dependency of our lives. This discussion of meaning, commitment and contingency may provide avenues for our postmodern culture to contemplate finitude in the context of gift and relationship.

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