Pascal’s Wager, No Wavering

The progressive writers leading up to and during the Enlightenment began to drive a wedge between faith and reason with the development of mathematics. Unlike St. Thomas Aquinas who used reason and logic to prove belief, the Enlightenment produced many scholars who used logic to disprove belief. Science appeared to explain away strongly held religious beliefs. Logic was king. Blaise Pascal combated this idea and strove to prove belief reasonable and Christ king. Pascal was not a theologian; he was a man of the sciences. He participated in round table discussions on mathematics and science that were held at his father’s house. At an early age he even invented a calculating machine to help his father. Pascal not only knew his science, he knew the importance of logic and reason within his disciplines. He also knew the limits of reason in regards to faith.

Later in his life Pascal became associated with a reactionary group of Catholics called the Jansenist. Their theology concentrated on the teachings of St. Augustine, focusing primarily on the concept of grace. Moving at times beyond St. Augustine’s ideas on predestination, they held that humankind had no ability outside the providence of God to attain salvation. Pascal held to this theology, and therefore it may appear odd that the Pascalian wager in the Pensées suggests that Pascal thought humans could attain grace through their own decision and will. Even though this reading shows a gross lack of knowledge of Pascal, it has caused many arguments against the wager. Ironically, the
most venomous attacks come from hardened atheist, a group for whom Pascal did not write. Pascal did not write the wager in order to attempt to show human’s ability to come to God on his or her own. Instead, Pascal was confronting a larger problem in the Enlightenment: the problem of a developing dichotomy between faith and reason. The belief that one can have reason in faith was being replaced with an idea that one should have faith in reason itself. This led the intellectuals to regard making a choice about religion as irrelevant.

Pascal wrote the wager to demonstrate that every person must make a choice about God and that believing in God was the reasonable choice. It gave confidence to believers and intended to convict the agnostics who felt they could live without making a decision. The wager allowed Pascal to answer the problem of faith working with reason through the analogy of gambling. His audience consisted of believers and agnostics living in the time of the Enlightenment. He was not writing to persuade the hardened atheist. One must consider his allegiance with the Jansenists and the other themes presented in both the *Provincials* and the *Pensées* in order to realize the true polemic behind his wager.

Pascal grew up in a household governed by Christian values. He did not develop a relationship with God until after childhood. He had two different conversion experiences, the second one being the most famous. He was so moved by the experience that he wrote it down and sewed it into his coat jacket.

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1 Pascal speaks towards a group, sometimes by name, of which he was removed by his conversion. They were part of a cultured, intellectual group that preferred agnosticism to atheism. Their code was based more on etiquette than ethics and many of the concepts came from the writings of Montaigne. This allowed them to not claim a belief in God and still participate in religious activities for social or political reasons. (Alban Krailshheimer, *Pascal* [New York: Hill and Wang, 1980], 43.)

2 In 1647 Pascal’s father Etienne broke his leg and was taken care of by members of Port Royal. They successfully converted the entire family. Pascal’s more famous experience came in 1654. According to a
Pascal’s older sister became the most loyal member of the family towards Port-Royal. Her prayers, along with a deeply personal conversion experience, led Pascal more deeply into the circle of influence held by the Jansenist. Jansenism reacted to the mediocrity of the people and to the ideas of the Jesuits who tried to appease the masses with weak theology. It resembled Puritanism as a revival of the austere moralist. Antoine Arnauld, a devout advocate for Jansenism, convinced Pascal to write the *Provincials* in opposition to Jesuits lax theology.

Jansenism originated when Saint-Cyran approached Cornelius Jansen about reforming the church. They both felt the Church moving away from the teachings of scripture and the church Fathers. The Jesuits did not like the competition for correct doctrine being created by the Jansenists. Jansen wrote *Augustinus* to explain what he believed St. Augustine taught concerning grace and human ability in salvation. Jansen composed *Augustinus* after much reading and meditation of the writings of St. Augustine. Jansen’s *Augustinus* interpreted Augustine’s theory on the condition of humans in a way that “justified Saint-Cyran’s spirituality.” Saint-Cyran contributed to the followers of Jansenism the teachings on harsh penance and a more puritan style of faith.

document found sewn into Pascal’s coat jacket, on Nov. 23rd from 10:30 till around midnight he experienced a mystical encounter with God. (Ibid., 9.)

3 Jacqueline became a nun at Port Royal only after her father died. He was a man of faith, but he did not want to lose his daughter. When the time came to sign a papal bull against the Jansenist she was one of the nuns that refused. At first they were spread out amongst different orders. This proved to cause more problems then it solved and so the church ended up bringing those nuns back together and they live out their lives quietly at Port-Royal. (Wallace K. Ferguson, “The Place of Jansenism in French History,” *The Journal of Religion* 7 [1927]: 36-37.)

4 Ibid., 17.

5 The Jesuits had significant influence in Rome and also on the people of the church. Because of their influence the Jansenist felt they needed to confront their theology, especially their views on the grace of God. The Jesuits promoted as view known as Molinism. Molinism was a resurgence of Pelagian theology. The Jesuits recreated this theology to appeal to the people with whom their popularity was waning. (Ibid., 23-24.)

Jansen completed the book shortly before dying of illness. The complete work was written, but not polished. Arnuald published the book quickly in order to make public the teachings of the Jansenists. He thought this would help the cause since they were under much scrutiny from Rome. The Jesuits, looking for any reason to place a bad name on Jansenism, marketed it as an attack on them. At that time any attack on the Jesuits became an attack on the church as a whole. The result the Jesuits wrote an opposition to what they claimed were five heretical propositions in *Augustinus*. The controversy of Jansenist theology surrounded the concepts of original sin and predestination.

The Jansenist view of predestination consisted of this: if a person goes to hell that is God’s justice and if a person goes to heaven that is God’s mercy. While remaining loyal to the Church of Rome, their theology looked very similar to the views of Calvin. Both held to the concept that due to humankind’s fall they deserved the punishment of hell. Only by God’s immense grace and abundant mercy does He choose to lift some from the punishment of hell. The Jansenist stayed close to the teachings of the church by banning the idea that God would send humans to hell. They did not reach a teaching on double predestination from scripture or from the teachings of St. Augustine.

Pascal and the Jansenist had strong teachings on the concept of original sin. The fall placed human kind outside the grace of God. Pascal looked at the fall as a dividing line between humans and God. Only God could overcome this problem, but it would come from his mercy. Pascal’s use of the fall as separating human history allowed Pascal

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to set his theology between Calvinism and Molinism.\(^9\) The Calvinist stating that the fall was apart of God’s plan for salvation and the Molinists claiming that all are offered salvation if they except it.\(^10\)

One main element to Pascal’s theology involved his views on the state of man after the fall. The concept of self-interest is central in Pascal’s view of Augustinian theology. Humans are made for God and sin involves humans placing themselves at the center of the universe instead of God.\(^11\) The fall corrupted the very nature of humans. No longer could they choose good over evil. Their natural inclination was to choose evil, to act in self-interest.\(^12\) Pascal explained in his *Pensées*, “It is a perverted judgment that makes every one place himself above the rest of the world, and prefer his own good, and the continuance of his own good fortune and life, to that of the rest of the world!”\(^13\)

The answer to humankind’s wretched state did not rest on the ability of humans to reach for God. They had to be given the gift of grace. Jansenism believed firmly in the mercy and grace that God shows to those whom He saves. Pascal, agreeing with the Jansenist theology, affirms the concept of God’s gift of grace. Grace is directly associated with an action for Pascal. It is not a one-time infusion but must be continually given to the faithful.\(^14\) Grace comes when requested.\(^15\) Prayer is the proper tool for asking for continual grace, but even the power to pray is a gift of grace. We can receive

\(^10\) Ibid.
\(^12\) Moriarty, *Cambridge Companion*, 147.
\(^14\) Moriarty, *Cambridge Companion*, 152.
\(^15\) Ibid.
grace if we ask. We cannot even ask if we are not given that gift from God. Prayer relies on officious grace instead of the state of the prayer.\textsuperscript{16}

One distinct difference between the theology of Jansenism versus the Jesuits concerned their ideas of grace. Jesuits held that man could make the choice between good and evil. The Jansenist abhorred this concept of indifference. Indifference negated original sin and humankind’s inability to choose good because of their natural inclination towards evil.\textsuperscript{17} Indifference suggested that grace evens out the inclination towards evil with an equal inclination towards the good. If grace merely equaled out the two tendencies then man would remain held in equilibrium.\textsuperscript{18} Grace has to overcome the tendency towards evil and therefore destroy the concept of indifference.\textsuperscript{19}

Pascal believed that humans could choose the good if they wanted. The problem arises in that unless he is given the grace he will not want to perform or choose the good.\textsuperscript{20} A person deprived of grace will not be able to fulfill the commandments. Pascal held this theology ardently. In order to fulfill the commandments people must want to do them, but people will not want to keep them without the gift of grace.\textsuperscript{21}

Pascal, while never an official member of the Jansenist order, agreed with the teachings that came from Port-Royal. Pascal became more strict and convinced of his doctrine of grace as he got closer to death.\textsuperscript{22} He remains famous for two collections that convey his agreement and belief in the doctrines of predestination and the human inability to come to God without the prompting of grace. One must understand that for

\begin{footnotes}
\item[16] Ibid., 153.
\item[17] Ibid., 152.
\item[18] Ibid.
\item[19] Ibid.
\item[20] Ibid.
\item[21] Ibid., 150.
\item[22] Honor, Pensées, xxi.
\end{footnotes}
Pascal humans do not have the ability opt out of heaven or hell. They must either choose evil, still in the state of sin, or choose good with the assistance of God’s grace. There can be no neutrality with Pascal; there is no grey in which to stand concerning God.

Blaise Pascal never wrote a book on theology. The Provincials were a group of pamphlets written to attack the Jesuits because of their attacks against the Jansenists. The Pensées were collected after his death and compiled into a book by his family. Both works had a specific audience. The former written to the Jesuits and the latter written primarily to agnostics. Pascal abhorred people who were in a state of apathy. To him the Jesuits had created a theology to make the masses feel good about themselves, but it was not creating an environment for conversion or opening someone to God’s grace. And the agnostics felt comfortable in the state of not making a choice for or against God. In response to this annoyance he wrote many times to ignite some reaction. He wanted people to come out of their apathy.

Antoine Arnauld, knowing the reputation Pascal had for polemics, asked Pascal to write what came to be the Provincial Letters. At first the reason for writing them was to help save Arnauld who was about to be condemned both by the Jesuits and the Dominicans. Both groups had decided to use the same words with different meanings in order to appear to have a united front in opposition to the Jansenist. The first three books dealt with this condemnation of Arnauld and alliance of the attackers. Pascal wrote in the

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23 Pascal’s first experience with the Jesuits was a controversy over the concept of whether a vacuum could ever exist. The Jesuit he was debating with was Père Noel. He was the rector at the Jesuit Collège de Clermont in Paris. (Ben Rogers, “Pascal’s Life and Times,” The Cambridge Companion to Pascal [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003], 9).

24 Pascal was influenced by the chevalier de Méré and Damien Mitton. Their philosophy was often what Pascal wrote against in his Pensées. Méré was also influential in Pascal’s development and interest in probability theory. (Ibid., 13.)


26 Ibid.
form of satire under a pen name to avoid punishment. What he wrote became a defense of the Jansenist view of grace that made the debate both more accessible and entertaining to the people.\footnote{Krailsheimer, \textit{Pascal}, 32.}

Grace was a major theme in the \textit{Provincials}. An argument around grace was inevitable in light of the vast theological differences between the Jansenists and the Jesuits. Pascal attacked the idea held and promoted to the people by the Jesuits that man can live a worldly life if they knew how to correct themselves by repenting in time.\footnote{Ibid., 34.} Pascal charged them with offering hope of salvation on the basest terms.\footnote{Ibid.} This went against Pascal’s own belief that grace, given by God’s mercy, comprised the only way humans could overcome their wretchedness.\footnote{Ibid.} In order to write these pamphlets Pascal had to engage in a crash course on moral theology.\footnote{Ibid., 32.} Prior to the \textit{Provincials} his writings centered on scientific interests. If it were not for the need to write the \textit{Provincials} this topic would have hardly been of interest for Pascal.\footnote{Ibid.} The \textit{Provincials} would begin an interest in writing essays on Christianity that would end with a collection of writings known as the \textit{Pensées}.

The \textit{Pensées} contains a list of thoughts that were going to be a larger work on the Christian faith. Pascal’s sister Jacqueline continually made health reasons the excuse for why he never finished the work.\footnote{Honor, \textit{Pensées}, xviii.} It has been noted that Pascal realized that because God chooses the destiny of humans by grace, writing an apologetic would have no influence
on a person’s salvation. The *Pensées* are often referred to as an apologetic work. This is true in the sense that Pascal gave a defense of the faith and explained the existence of original sin. Pascal wrote to convince the agnostic intellectuals of the inability to escape the reality of their fallen nature. No matter how much they used their imaginations and exalted their minds with knowledge their soul remained in its wretched state.

He spent much of the beginning of the book explaining the limits of reason in faith. Pascal mentions in the *Pensées* that a Christian cannot give a logical explanation for their faith, but he contends this does not make Christianity unreasonable. Pascal did not write to make Christianity more intellectual. This would have worked against the very people he was aiming his argument. The agnostics’ problem stemmed from relying too much on their own intellectual reasoning ability. He wrote to make it more “desirable.” People will not come to Jesus unless they are attracted to the life of a believer.

Pascal did not put the *Pensées* writings in any order in regards to the sayings. He did have an internal order in regards to how he dealt with people’s condition. Pascal divided humans into three levels. These include the carnal, the mind, and the will. He stated that humans are incapable of treating knowledge in an absolute manner because of

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34 Ibid.
35 “Who then will blame Christians for not being able to give a reason for their belief, since they profess a religion for which they cannot give a reason? They declare, in expounding it to the world, that it is a foolishness, *stultitiam*; and then you complain that they do not prove it! If they proved it, they would not keep their word; it is in lacking proofs, that they are not lacking sense. (Pascal, *Pensées*, 65.)
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
their depraved nature. Because of their inability to treat knowledge in this fashion Pascal did not write this polemic in a traditional style. His arguments were not meant to build one on the other from the beginning to the end. Each one did keep the three levels as building blocks for each individual argument.

He strived at all times to avoid over simplification. He attempted to approach an answer from many different perspectives. This is one reason why there are many small sayings and different approaches at arguing for his main point: humans must make a choice, with Christianity the most reasonable. Until his death, Pascal maintained the idea that human beings cannot come to God unless God gives them the grace to approach him. He understood that not every person would be given the double grace of obeying the commandments and perseverance. Just as the gift of double grace cannot be known, neither can one know who will be doomed. One must act in a way that may help someone’s salvation. Even though Pascal did not write the Pensées as an evangelical tool he maintained the mindset of presenting the reasonableness of Christianity in a way that may have an effect on someone’s path to salvation. The Pensées are not a step by step on how to become a Christian. Pascal attempts to explain by using the state of humans, something each person can know, that everyone must come to a knowledge that before God our soul remains wretched without His grace. His most controversial polemic and perhaps strongest attempt at showing the necessity for humans to choose come in the wager.

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41 Ibid., 245.
43 Ibid.
44 Ibid.
45 Pascal felt deep concern for the fact that some who may seem to be part of the elect may in fact fall away. (Moriarty, Cambridge Companion, 151.)
46 Ibid.
The wager remains the most critiqued portion of Pascal’s *Pensées*. Having discussed the theology of Pascal and his continuity of this theology within his spiritual writings it may appear to some readers after reading the wager that it does not follow his theology. In fact, the wager maintains consistency with the context of Pascal’s theology and his purpose for writing the *Pensées*. Many critics, separating the wager from the rest of Pascal, have written papers on its problems. These critics fail to view the wager in the full light of Pascal’s thoughts and therefore make arguments against a meaning of the wager that Pascal never intended. The key to understanding the wager involves keeping it within the larger context. Viewing the wager in this way enables the reader to see that Pascal’s main purpose was to show the reasonableness of Christianity. He was not making a case for the concept of free will and humankind’s ability to come to God on their own. A distinction must be made between reason and reasonableness in order to understand Pascal’s argument. Reason does not allow us to find God, but the faith of a Christian is reasonable.

In this life each person must make a decision to believe in God or to deny his existence. The intellectual agnostics maintained that they could escape the game and live without making a bet. Pascal so disliked this concept of indifference that he developed the wager argument to convince the agnostics that by their actions alone they are making a bet. No one is exempt from the game because the game goes on around us, and people

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46 The most famous objection is the many gods objection. The many gods objection raises the problem of choosing god A or B. Pascal’s wager is not intended to make this decision. It is to claim the rationality of God. He offers his arguments for the Christian God at the beginning of the *Pensées*. The authors of these arguments apparently did not read the beginning of the *Pensées* where Pascal spent extensive time developing the case for the Christian god. By the time the reader would reach the Wager they have been logically convinced that the only choose would be the Christian god. (Jeff Jordon, “The Many-Gods Objection,” *Gambling on God: Essays on Pascal’s Wager* [Lanhan, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1994], 101.)
cannot control it. The world in which Pascal wrote had become very confident in human abilities to master their surroundings and understand great mysteries through learning.

The agnostics essentially came to a decision that their mental knowledge and power of reason made them above the game of life. They felt they were exempt from the game. The wager argued against their position, and in it Pascal remained firm that even if one does not want to make a decision that, even then, a decision has been made.

Pascal believed that reason had a role in concept of faith, but he made sure to put limits on the ability of reason. One can logically come to the conclusion that God exists. At the same time reason can delude a person into believing they are beyond the need to make a decision on God’s existence. He was aware that there were those whose hearts were hardened to any arguments for the Christian god. Pascal’s wager was not for everyone. It was designed for someone with a will to believe that God’s existence is at least plausible. The wager was not for the convinced atheist. Pascal tried to prove the logic of Christianity for those at least willing to believe. Reason only works to break down the walls of rationality. Reason is an aid to faith; it does not enable anyone to come to God.

Therefore, those to whom God has imparted religion by invitation are very fortunate, and justly convinced. But to those who do not have it, we can give it only by reasoning, waiting for god to give them spiritual insight, without which faith is only human, and useless for salvation.

While the beginning of the Pensées develops the case for the Christian god, the wager uses Pascal’s work with the probability theory to show the reasonableness of those

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49 Ibid., 167.
50 Pascal, *Pensées*, 79.
who have faith. They have not just blindly decided to follow God, an argument given by those who reasoned away the existence of God. One important point that Pascal makes is that the Christian begins by saying that God cannot be explained so critics cannot fault the Christian for an inability to give reasons for belief. The Christian cannot be criticized for his belief since “either bet is equally made in the dark.”

Real saving faith comes from God alone. One cannot just believe with human faith and expect to reach heaven. Pascal did not advocate believing in God merely perhaps to gain heaven. The wager is not an “insurance policy.”

The change of external behavior should open doors to internal humility. Faith is a gift of God, not a result of reasoning. “Men will never believe with a saving and real faith, unless God inclines their heart: and they will believe as soon as He inclines it.”

Faith is above reason. Reason puts too much emphasis on raising people’s ability to be divine without God. Pascal disputes the use of reason about faith because of this. In Pascal’s levels reason ranks below faith and acts only to help faith. Many of his contemporaries took the opposing position that faith ranks below reason.

The next issue in the wager surrounded the concept of conduct. The questioner asks what to do if they want to have this faith in God, but they just do not think they can. Pascal explained that they should engage themselves in the rituals of the church and by doing so they may prepare their heart to receive God’s grace. Pascal does not advocate the use of mere works to come to God. The idea that man could work his way to God, or even faith, goes against his theology. He did realize that if one was searching for God

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52 Leszek, God Owes Us Nothing, 167.
53 Ibid.
54 Moriarty, Cambridge Companion, 144
55 Pascal, Pensées, 80.
that the heart would be better prepared for the gift of faith if they had already begun to control their flesh. One needs to remember that Jansenism had a strict spirituality that involved performing actions that were meant to suppress the flesh. Proper conduct is only so good as it influences the heart.56 This may lead to conversion.

The final decision of bestowing salvific grace belongs to God. The wager, while showing the reasonableness of faith, also shows a small step that man can make towards receiving this gift. While we are changing our behavior to believe in God we will ultimately change our behavior and develop a faith that is selfless.58 This switch from selfish reasons for believing in God and having selfless reasons goes back to Pascal’s concept of the fall of humans. The fall produced sin, the idea that in each individual they are the center to everything. God’s gift of grace transforms this nature into one that restores the order of God being the center.

According to scripture God created humans in His image. Before the fall they dwelt in the garden and were given dominion over all the earth. After the fall humankind became selfish beings that found their natural inclination focused on evil. They become blind to God. Throughout history, people have tried to overcome this blindness through various religions and philosophies. Since the soul could not see God, humans turned to the one thing they know makes them different from the animals, the ability to think. Pascal shows in the *Pensées* the danger of allowing reason to control and govern the whole being. It can lead to arrogance and works to separate humans farther from God.

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57 Ibid.
In the world that Pascal wrote there developed yet another danger with raising the capacity of reason above its natural level. When one believes they can answer all questions with reason alone they begin to believe they can rationally explain away a need for God. This road of thought led to the prevalence of the intellectual agnostics. Able to separate themselves from a need of God and yet believe they did not have to make a clear decision either way. Pascal, with his extreme distaste for indifference, used his spiritual writings to expose this false reasoning.

With the Jesuits he felt they were promoting a theology and atmosphere that encouraged an indecisiveness concerning God. They allowed the people to believe they had the innate capacity to choose good and evil without the help of God’s grace. When he began writing the *Pensées,* he targeted another specific group with the agnostics. They too, while not being a huge influence in regards to church authority, were promoting the idea that one could pretend to be religious without ever making a clear decision. They allowed themselves to use the church and religious functions for social and political reasons, but separate themselves in regards to matters of salvation. Pascal felt a great concern for this group not only because of his abhorrence to indifference, but also owning to the fact this was the social group he was involved with prior to his second conversion.

The wager acts as the ultimate demonstration that whether the agnostics want to mentally decide on God or not, a decision is being made. People like Mitton would have recognized the probability theory and its implications since he introduced Pascal to the world of gambling. Pascal wrote for those who felt they could sit out this hand and not place a bet. The atheist at least has made a conscience choice. The agnostic becomes
more detrimental by creating a third option that does not exist. Pascal’s critics over the years have complained about the choice that Pascal believes is most reasonable. They have missed the point of the wager altogether. Yes, Pascal believed one should choose the existence of God. As noted from his theology believing in the existence of God would not guarantee salvation.

The point of the wager is an accumulation of his theology on the state of man and God’s grace. Humans are wretched and no amount of reason will change that innate fact. Only God’s grace can overcome our natural condition. The agnostic choice is not an option. There must, and will, be a choice made if not by our intellect then by our actions. The wager acts as a wake up call to those who try, through reason, to opt out of the game. Pascal understood that in this game of life there is no room for wavering.