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Pascal was No Fideist

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the speech described here from that described in 1 Cor. 12 and 14. In Rom 8:12-27, the focus is on Spirit enablement that permits believers to speak to or before God as epitomized in the cry, "Abba! Father!" See Dunn, "Spirit Speech: Reflections on Romans 8:12-27," in *Romans and the People of God*, 82-91.

14. Wright, *Romans*, 510. Wright's words were actually directed at the entirety of chs. 5-8, though they seem especially pertinent to 8:1-27.

15. Engberg-Pedersen, *Paul and the Stoics*, 219-23.

16. It is my hope that this study in some small way responds favorably to the challenge put forth by R. Wall and J. Green in their inspiring vision of the future of biblical studies in the Wesleyan spirit. See Wall, "The Future of Wesleyan Biblical Studies," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 33 (1998): 101-15; and Green, "Reading the Bible as Wesleyans: A Response to Robert Wall," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 33 (1998): 116-29.

## PASCAL WAS NO FIDEIST

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DAVID BAGGETT

In the context of discussing the philosophy of religion generally and natural theology particularly, Elliott Sober, in his *Core Questions in Philosophy*, devotes a lecture to Blaise Pascal. Pascal, the brilliant seventeenth-century French philosopher and mathematician, died at thirty-nine, not having completed his book in progress. The work was to be a Christian apologetic, a rational defense of the faith. What we have in the *Pensees* is a collection of notes that Pascal had been intending to use to write the book that was not completed before Pascal's premature death. Nonetheless, a careful reading of these remarkable notes reveals a thinker deeply engaged in questions concerning the human condition. They canvass evidence for the faith, the nature of rationality, and the limits of reason. The *Pensees* is a classic, yet nothing more than a collection of notes for the book Pascal never finished. One can only imagine what the final result might have looked like.

Sober's generally excellent and widely popular introductory text on philosophy is used in countless beginning philosophy courses, and so his treatment of Pascal is perhaps the only exposure to this brilliant thinker that many college students will ever have. It is therefore discouraging to see that, despite Pascal's impeccable credentials as a Christian philosopher and religious thinker, Sober's treatment of Pascal is summarized in a chapter entitled "Pascal and Irrationality." Sober begins the chapter by writing that Pascal was interested in the question of whether it could be rational to believe in God even if one thinks that it is enormously improbable that God exists. Admittedly, Pascal's Wager may have an implication pertaining to that question, but that is little evidence to believe that this indeed was an issue Pascal was much interested in.

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What makes it unlikely that this was Pascal's concern is that Pascal surely did not think that the preponderance of evidence weighed against the specifically Christian or generally theistic hypothesis. To the (unlikely) extent that Pascal was concerned with such a question, he was entertaining what he considered a quite imaginary hypothetical. Sober neglects to mention this. Indeed, to the contrary, he adds to the misimpression that Pascal himself may have considered the religious hypothesis in question to be without evidential support, and he does so in a few ways. He casts Pascal as advancing only the Wager: a purely prudential and non-evidential argument for believing that God exists. Believe in God or else! Sober treats the Wager merely as a threat that would retain its force even in the absence of any evidence for the theistic hypothesis.<sup>1</sup> He makes no mention of any other philosophical contributions in Pascal's thought or the *Pensees*. Readers of Sober unfamiliar with Pascal would naturally be led to believe that Pascal's sole contribution is the Wager. Since the Wager potentially works even if no evidence for God's existence can be adduced at all, Sober takes this to mean that Pascal's intention was to underscore that particular implication of the Wager.

Numerous comments of Sober's in this lecture—not to mention the title of the chapter itself!—bear out this point. As the chapter proceeds, for example, Sober explains what a prudential reason to believe something would be like. If I promise you a million dollars for believing that the president is juggling candy bars right now, and tell you that if you do not get yourself to believe the proposition I will impale you with a toothbrush, you have a prudential reason to believe it. That is the sense in which you have a reason to believe the proposition, but of course this is not any sort of evidential reason. "You haven't one shred of evidence that the proposition is true. Let's describe this fact by saying that you don't have an evidential reason for believing the proposition in question."<sup>2</sup> Sober then employs this analogy to talk about the Wager:

Pascal's Wager is intended to provide you with a prudential reason for believing that God exists even if you think there is no evidence that there is a God. Even if you think all the evidence is against the existence of God, Pascal thinks he can give you a prudential reason for theism, so long as you grant that the existence of God is at least possible.<sup>3</sup>

The candy bar analogy hints that God's likelihood is about as great as George W. juggling Snickers. Sober seems to consider both propositions unlikely and short on evidence, and perhaps even propositions against which we could adduce a great deal of evidence.

This is not the first time Sober employs a strategic analogy with theism. Those familiar with his text may recall his Only Game in Town fallacy. This is the fallacy of thinking we are obliged to accept an explanation for a particular phenomenon just because it is the only explanation so far proffered. At key junctures when Sober wants to underscore the implausibility of theism he raises the specter of this fallacy. For instance, a few chapters before the Pascal lecture, Sober writes the following, in answer to the question of whether one ought to accept the theological explanation for patterns of reproduction in the absence of a better explanation by science:

Recall the anecdote from Lecture 3. If you and I are sitting in a cabin and hear noises in the attic, it is easy to formulate an explanation of those noises. I suggest the noises are due to gremlins bowling. This hypothesis has the property that if it were true, it would explain why we heard the noises. But this fact about the gremlin hypothesis doesn't mean that the hypothesis is plausible.<sup>4</sup>

From this Sober concludes that, by parity of reasoning, we should rest content simply to admit that at present we do not understand patterns of reproduction. Rather than giving up and opting for the theological explanation, we should be patient enough to endure what is likely to be only temporary ignorance until science gives us the explanation.

The implicit mutual exclusivity of theological and scientific explanations in Sober's analysis betrays that, contrary to Sober's claim in that chapter that evolution as he was construing it was neutral on the question of theism, science's success at providing explanations was increasingly rendering theism obsolete and explanatorily idle.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps on an epistemic par with bowling gremlins. Science construed as inherently at odds with theism would constitute what William James would have called *scientism*, a sort of hyperfaith in science's ability to answer every imaginable question. (One thinks of the recent scientist who claimed to have a scientific explanation for the creation of the universe from nothing.) This gremlin analogy is what is most instructive here. Notice that a proposition about bowling gremlins is not just lacking in evidential support, but is a proposition against which an impressive array of evidence can be adduced. It is, by design, a patently silly notion. So of course if it were the only theory on the table, it would be rational to wait for a more acceptable alternative to come along. To think otherwise is to reason fallaciously.

This elucidation of the Only Game in Town fallacy conceals an important fact. What makes such reasoning fallacious is not just the decision to accept the only theory available, but doing so when the theory in question is, at best, minimally supported by evidence, patently absurd at worst. Suppose we were to alter the analogy for a moment. Imagine that we are at the cabin and hear the noises in the attic. Having been there before, you surmise it is neighbor kids who you happen to know like to sneak in and go play in the attic. I may not know about those kids, but once I hear the hypothesis I would be well within my epistemic rights to infer that that is the best explanation, despite that it is the only explanation in the offing. That one accepts the only theory on the table is not automatically flawed reasoning. That I may not be obligated to accept it hardly entails that I am obligated to reject it. When the example is bowling gremlins, though, the subtle slide seems persuasive from permission to refrain from accepting a proposition to an obligation to reject it. That Sober employs an analogy between bowling gremlins and theism is a maneuver that many thoughtful theists would naturally resist. If Sober himself personally believes that theism and gremlins are on an epistemic par, that is of course his prerogative. It is surely *not* the opinion of all intelligent philosophers. For many, the plausibility of theism seems much greater, inclining them to display considerably more openness than Sober does, despite the lipservice he pays to the importance of such openness, to theistic explanations of phenomena not otherwise plausibly explained or explainable.

What Sober's penchant for epistemically uncharitable analogies with theism goes to show is probably Sober's own skepticism, but he needs to be careful not to project the appearance that Pascal himself shared such skepticism. Pascal was, of course, not uninfluenced by skeptical thought, but a careful reading of the *Pensees* makes clear that he hardly considered theism implausible or irrational. The notes constitutive of the *Pensees* were being compiled for the purpose of an expansive, comprehensive Christian apologetic. To suggest, even implicitly, that Pascal was preoccupied with the matter of constructing an argument to believe even if there is no evidence for God's existence borders the disingenuous. It is not an uncommon treatment of Pascal by philosophers acquainted only with his Wager, but it is a woefully inadequate and unrepresentative treatment of Pascal's philosophical work.<sup>6</sup> By delimiting one's presentation of Pascal to two pages from the *Pensees* and then not disabusing the reader from believing that a mere inadvertent implication of the Wager constitutes Pascal's central preoccupation is just poor analysis. Whatever pedagogical benefits such an approach features pale in the light of the disservice to and skewed representation of Pascal.

There is room for some plausible deniability by Sober on nearly all my charges here. He does not explicitly say that Pascal was only involved in advancing the Wager; he does not insist that Pascal himself believed there to be no evidence for theism generally or Christianity particularly. No, the lack of troublesome logical implications leaves room for deniability; however, Sober's implicatures are undeniable. Communication takes place between the lines, not just by straightforward assertion. For instance, later in the lecture Sober writes, "Pascal aimed to provide a prudential reason, not an evidential reason." Sober might insist that, contextually considered, such a statement clearly refers to the Wager, which is never explicitly claimed to be the only aspect of Pascal's writing. However, it is obvious that introductory students unfamiliar with Pascal would naturally take Sober's statement to mean that Pascal was unconcerned with evidential matters. That no primary selections from Pascal involving his evidential considerations are included in Sober's book lessens the likelihood that such misimpressions will be corrected. The number of students who heed Sober's bibliography at the end of the section and actually look at Pascal's words for themselves are probably few and far between.

Pascal aimed to provide in the *Pensees* ever so many evidential reasons to believe in God's existence and the truth of Christianity. Among them were arguments to show Christianity's appeal to people in all sorts of different cultural situations and Christianity's ability to account for both the greatness and the wretchedness of man. Pascal took Jesus' miracles and fulfillment of prophecies as effective indications of the authenticity of his claims. Pascal also gave an argument that echoes C.S. Lewis's famous Trilemma argument. The way Pascal put it, it's altogether unlikely that the Apostles who attested to the historicity of Christ's resurrection were either deceived or deceivers.

Despite these arguments and many others that Pascal thought could be deployed for arguing for the truth of Christianity, Pascal also happened to be acutely aware of reason's limitations. Faith for Pascal was a way of knowing that was supernaturally inspired. Faith was not contrary to reason, but it exceeds reason in terms of the certainty it is able to confer. Take the efforts of natural theology, the cosmological,

teleological, or ontological proofs of God's existence, for example. These philosophical arguments, Pascal writes, "are so far removed from man's reasoning, and so complicated, that they have little force. When they do help some people it is only at the moment when they see the demonstration. An hour later they are afraid of having made a mistake."<sup>7</sup> Few theists' genuine faith is primarily rooted in such metaphysical proofs anyway. Moreover, it seems unlikely that God is primarily measuring people's philosophical acumen or argumentative prowess when he separates the sheep from the goats at the eschaton—as if heaven were a reward for thinking through implications of an S5 modal logic or the principle of sufficient reason.

Pascal's sensitivity to reason's limitations led him once to ask whether probability was itself probable, a question that practically serves as a precursor to Hume's problem of induction. Influenced by his famous elder French contemporary, Pascal also saw clearly reason's inability to establish with Cartesian certainty that we are not dreaming right now. Pascal's use of reason enabled him to identify reason's limitations, which naturally led him to infer that reason is not everything. That reason is not everything, however, hardly entails that reason is nothing, or that Pascal can rightly be taken as a paradigmatic irrationalist. That Pascal was no strong rationalist does not mean he was a fideist. That he was not Aquinas did not make him Tertullian. Pascal's sometimes cryptic and obscurantist way of expressing his thoughts in what has to be remembered were the notes of the *Pensees*, if exploited and removed from context, can make it seem like he was denying reason altogether. A fair reading reveals this simply was not the case. He characterized as an excess not only "allowing only reason," but also "excluding reason."<sup>8</sup> "Reason's last step is to recognize that there is an infinite number of things which surpass it. It is simply feeble if it does not go as far as realizing that."<sup>9</sup> Pascal could sense reason's inability to confer Cartesian certainty, induction's inability to be noncircularly established, and that imagination sometimes dwarfed even the most solidly grounded reason. Reason was important for Pascal, but it could fail to provide even the most basic answers to our questions, and "if natural things surpass it, what will we say about supernatural things?"<sup>10</sup>

So the suggestion that Pascal's Wager, taken in isolation, can adequately summarize Pascal is simply farfetched. Justice can not even be done to the Wager itself when it is taken in isolation. Doing so invariably tempts the reader of Pascal to interpret the Wager in the crassest of fashions. Deploying his insights as a mathematician, Pascal had the insight that there was an infinity and eternity to lose if we did not align our lives correctly to the ultimate reality. As Sober puts it with maximal crassness, if "you don't believe there is a God," and there is one, "Pascal says you suffer an infinite punishment—you receive eternal damnation."<sup>11</sup> Surely the potential loss of an infinite good of an ethically promising kind is a relevant consideration for someone who might be genuinely teetering between alternatives like theism and atheism and if, as Pascal suggests, reason alone is insufficient to conclusively settle the matter evidentially. God's existence and whether or not this life is all there is makes a huge difference to the way we ought to live and do our philosophy. As Pascal wrote, "There can be no doubt that whether the soul is mortal or immortal ought to make the whole difference in ethics. And yet philosophers have drawn up their ethics independently of this!"<sup>12</sup> He adds the following:

The immortality of the soul is something of such vital importance to us, which affects us so deeply, that we would have to have lost all feeling in order to be indifferent to the truth about it. All our actions and thoughts must follow such different paths, according to whether there are eternal blessings to hope for or not, that it is impossible to take a step sensibly and discerningly except by determining it with this point in mind, which ought to be our ultimate aim.<sup>13</sup>

It is not that Pascal thought theism was unlikely but we had better cover our cosmic rear ends anyway, but rather that theism was likely true and that it had remarkable implications that need to be seriously reckoned with. His point about reason's inability to settle the matter is not that theism is objectively unlikely or evidentially unsupported, but that our decision on this matter is less a matter of being rigid and strict evidentialists and more a matter of responding to an invitation to a relationship. Lovers do not issue calls to believe in their existence and be good evidentialists, but rather to enter into a holistically intimate relationship by wooing their beloved's heart and mind both. The principled reason, Pascal seems to suggest, that God does not overwhelm our intellect with light or coerce our will by flooding us with undeniable evidence is that he wants to gently woo our hearts and appeal to more than merely our intellect. "God wants to motivate the will more than the mind. Absolute clarity would be more use to the mind and would not help the will."<sup>14</sup> The suggestion that Pascal himself would insist that mere propositional belief in God's existence suffices to enter into the blessedness of heaven is radically mistaken. Pascal's account of reason's limitations has everything to do with God's wooing us more holistically than merely in terms of our coming to assent to his bare existence.

Pascal argues time and again that there is enough evidence to make religious belief rational, but not enough to make it impossible. "There is enough light for those who desire to see, and enough darkness for those of a contrary disposition."<sup>15</sup> "There is enough light to enlighten the elect and enough darkness to humble them. There is enough darkness to blind the damned and enough light to condemn them and leave them without excuses."<sup>16</sup> Sober's emaciated treatment of Pascal gravitates to the peripheral and eschews the central and ineliminable. It is important to let Pascal speak for himself:

The prophecies, even the miracles and proofs of our religion, are not of such a nature that they can be said to be absolutely convincing, but they are also such that it cannot be said unreasonable to believe them. So there is evidence and obscurity, to enlighten some and obscure the others. But the evidence is such that it exceeds, or at least equals, the evidence to the contrary, so that it cannot be reason which decides us not to follow it. Therefore it can only be concupiscence and wickedness of heart.

#### NOTES

1. William James, commenting on the Wager similarly construed in his famous essay "The Will to Believe," wrote, "You probably feel that when religious faith expresses itself thus, in the language of the gaming-table, it is put to its last trumps. Surely Pascal's own personal belief

in masses and holy water had far other springs; and this celebrated page of his is but an argument for others, a last desperate snatch at a weapon against the hardness of the unbelieving heart. We feel that a faith in masses and holy water adopted willfully after such a mechanical calculation would lack the inner soul of faith's reality; and if we were ourselves in the place of the Deity, we should probably take particular pleasure in cutting off believers of this pattern from their infinite reward." James went on to argue that the only way for the Wager to have any pull is for the option in question to have some pull on us already, that is, to be a live option. Despite the appearance of disagreement with Pascal, James eventually demonstrated important points of resonance with Pascal, such as recognizing the importance of willfully choosing between important options when the evidential case is not decisive and in recognizing that what is at stake where religion is concerned is a potential relationship, carrying with it its own logic. C.S. Lewis, in "On Obstinacy of Belief," would echo these very themes as well.

2. Elliott Sober, *Core Questions in Philosophy: A Text with Readings*, 3rd ed. (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2001), p. 98.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid., p. 75.

5. This is increasingly common among secular philosophers who treat theism as an hypothesis that must provide the best explanation of various phenomena if we are to be rational in believing it. Although theism can plausibly be argued to provide such explanations, a fair number of Christian philosophers have rightly pointed out that theism is not rightly thought of as akin to a scientific theory designed to explain the world.

6. Pascal's philosophical contributions have also been trivialized by those who resent his having left behind his mathematical pursuits to do religious philosophy. As E.T. Bell writes, in *Men of Mathematics*, "...we shall consider Pascal primarily as a highly gifted mathematician who let his masochistic proclivities for self-torturing and profitless speculations on the sectarian controversies of his day degrade him to what would now be called a religious neurotic." I am rather inclined to think that much of the same genius that led to his mathematical achievement inspired his philosophical insight.

7. Blaise Pascal, *Pensees and Other Writings*, tr. Honor Levi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), no. 222.

8. Ibid., no. 214.

9. Ibid., no. 220.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid., no. 100.

12. Ibid., no. 507.

13. Ibid., no. 681.

14. Ibid., no. 266. Famous atheist-turned-Deist Antony Flew was a featured guest at a recent Oxbridge conference, a conference held in honor of C.S. Lewis. In answer to the question of what it would take to convince him of a miracle, he cited a sort of miracle so undeniable that nobody in their right mind could deny it. Pascal would challenge Flew to consider that God might have principled reasons not to so radically illumine the mind with revelation and thereby effectively coerce the will.

15. Ibid., no. 182. Virtually the same sentiment also in no. 274.

16. Ibid., no. 268.

17. Ibid., no. 423.