

Can We Prove That God Exists?

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It Is Better to Believe in God's Existence Than to Deny It

Blaise Pascal (1623–62) was one of the most important scientific, philosophical, and religious figures of seventeenth-century France. He made important contributions to mathematics and physics and is generally regarded as the founder of modern probability theory. But Pascal is perhaps best known for his writings in spirituality and religious controversy. He came under the influence of a radically conservative Catholic movement known as Jansenism and defended it in a series of satirical publications called Provincial Letters. A powerful religious experience in 1654 colored his entire outlook on the relation of faith and philosophy, leading to a collection of notes on a projected defense of the Christian religion. These notes, found after his death, were published in 1670 under the title Thoughts of M. Pascal on Religion and Several Other Subjects and are usually referred to under their French title, Pensées.

We have considered three major arguments for God's existence. They are drawn from widely disparate sources, some Christian like St. Anselm, others ultimately from non-religious sources. The cosmological and teleological arguments in fact are found in Aristotle and Plato, for instance, hundreds of years before the birth of Christ. Each argument has its special appeal. The ontological argument has always fascinated philosophers of a mathematical or logical turn of mind. The cosmological and teleological arguments hold great interest for philosophers who insist on the senses as origins of whatever knowledge we can have. And the teleological argument appeals to the poet in us, and to our sense of order and beauty.

But, as we said at the beginning of Part 3, philosophy and religion do not always intersect. Some great believing religionists have insisted that access to God transcends the human mind utterly. No argument for God's existence is satisfactory, and belief alone is necessary for religious life. Pascal is a great example of such a position. There is, for him, no rational proof for or against God's existence. Nonetheless, one must choose to

believe or not. The option is unavoidable. We are forced to wager. Now consider the alternatives: either God exists or he does not exist. If he does not exist, we lose nothing for believing that he does exist. If he does exist, however, we lose everything if we choose not to believe. The rational choice must be to believe in God's existence; we have everything to gain, infinite happiness and immortality, and nothing to lose.

Interestingly, Pascal's argument is not one in support of the existence of God, but one that supports the reasonability of a natural tendency to believe in God. It supports religion, but not philosophical arguments in behalf of religion. The traditional arguments for God's existence lead to skepticism, according to Pascal, and we must change the playing field from reason to emotion. However vulgar it may seem to talk of religion as though it were a matter of betting on the horses, it is a fact of human nature that some choice is forced upon us. Either we choose to believe or we don't. Pascal asks us to consider the likely consequences of each choice. The choice for him is clear: whether or not God really exists, it makes more sense to believe than not to.

To Study

1. On what basis does Pascal argue that we can't know God's existence?
2. Discuss Pascal's "wager."
3. How can one come to faith in God?
4. Why is it reasonable to believe God exists even though it is uncertain?
5. What is the role of custom in proof?
6. Discuss: "The heart has its reasons, which reason does not know."

Let us now speak according to natural lights.

If there is a God, He is infinitely incomprehensible, since, having neither parts nor limits, He has no affinity to us. We are then incapable of knowing either what He is or if He is. This being so, who will dare to undertake the decision of the question? Not we, who have no affinity to Him.

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 . . . ; 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 in sense. "Yes, but although this excuses those who offer it as such, and takes away from them the blame of putting it forward without reason, it does not excuse those who receive it." 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 separates 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.

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 to 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 infinitely happy life to gain. But there is here an infinity of an infinitely happy life to gain, a chance of gain against an finite number of chances of loss, and what you stake is finite. It is all divided; wherever 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 player 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.

"I confess it, I admit it. But, still, is there no means of seeing the faces of the cards?" Yes, Scripture and the rest, etc. "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. Endeavour then to convince yourself, not by increase in 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 all 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.

The end of this discourse. Now, what harm will befall you in taking this side? You will be faithful, honest, 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 recognise that you have wagered for something certain and infinite, for which you have given nothing.

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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; for we ought to work for an uncertainty according to the doctrine of chance which was demonstrated above.

Saint Augustine has seen that we work for an uncertainty, on sea, in battle, etc. But he has not seen the doctrine of chance which proves that we should do so. Montaigne has seen that we are shocked at a fool, and that habit is all-powerful; but he has not seen the reason of this effect.

All these persons have seen the effects, but they have not seen the causes. They are, in comparison with those who have discovered the causes, as those who have only eyes are in comparison with those who have intellect. For the effects are perceptible by sense, and the causes are visible only to the intellect. And although these effects are seen by the mind, this mind is, in comparison with the mind which sees the causes, as the bodily senses are in comparison with the intellect.

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For we must not misunderstand ourselves; we are as much automatic as intellectual; and hence it comes that the instrument by which conviction is attained is not demonstration alone. How few things are demonstrated! Proofs only convince the mind. Custom is the source of our strongest and most believed proofs. It bends the automaton, which persuades the mind without its thinking about the matter. Who has demonstrated that there will be a tomorrow, and that we shall die? And what is more believed? It is then custom which persuades us of it; it is custom that makes so many men Christians; custom that makes them Turks, heathens, artisans, soldiers, etc. (Faith in baptism is more received among Christians than among Turks.) Finally, we must have recourse to it when once the mind has seen where the truth is, in order to quench our thirst, and steep ourselves in that belief, which escapes us at every hour; for always to have proofs ready is too much trouble. We must get an easier belief, which is that of custom, which, without violence, without art, without argument, makes us believe things, and inclines all our powers to this belief, so that our soul falls naturally into it.

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The heart has its reasons, which reason does not know. We feel it in a thousand things. I say that the heart naturally loves the Universal Being, and also itself naturally, according as it gives itself to them; and it hardens itself against one or the other at its will. You have rejected the one and kept the other. Is it by reason that you love yourself?

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Man is but a reed, the most feeble thing in nature, but he is a thinking reed. The entire universe need not arm itself to crush him. A vapour, a drop of water suffices to kill him. But, if the universe were to crush him, man would still be more noble than that which killed him, because he knows that he dies and the advantage which the universe has over him; the universe knows nothing of this.

All our dignity consists then in thought.

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Thought.—All the dignity of man consists in thought. Thought is therefore by its nature a wonderful and incomparable thing. It must have strange defects to be contemptible. But it has such, so that nothing is more ridiculous. How great it is in its nature! How vile it is in its defects! . . . There is no permanence for man: it is a condition which is at once natural to mankind, yet most contrary to his inclinations. . . . We burn with the desire of finding a secure abode, an ultimate firm base on which to build a tower which might rise to infinity; but our very foundation crumbles completely, and earth opens before us unto the very abyss.

To Think About

1. Does Pascal's theory provide grounds for belief in the existence of many gods as well as only one? A female or a male God?
2. In what situation is religious belief a waste of effort? Never?
3. "There remains one fundamental hurdle which no form of Christianity can overcome: the fact that it demands of man a morally repugnant attitude towards the universe. It is now very widely held that the basic element of the Christian religion is an attitude of worship towards a being supremely worthy of being worshipped and that it is religious feelings and experiences which apprise their owner of such a being and which inspire in him the knowledge or the feeling of complete dependence, awe, worship, mystery, and self-abasement." *Kurt Baier*
4. "Christianity thus demands of men an attitude inconsistent with one of the pre-suppositions of morality: that man is not wholly dependent on something else, that man has free will, that man is in principle capable of responsibility." *Kurt Baier*
5. "On the surface the Christians practised an austere sexual morality, easily recognizable and acclaimed by outsiders: total sexual renunciation by the few; marital concord between the spouses; strong disapproval of remarriage. This surface was presented openly to outsiders. Lacking the clear ritual boundaries provided in Judaism by circumcision and dietary laws, Christians tended to make their exceptional sexual discipline bear the full burden of expressing the difference between themselves and the pagan world." *Peter Brown*
6. "Asceticism and intolerance are the two main contributions that Christianity has made to European culture." *W. Liebasschuetz*
7. "If only God would give me some clear sign! Like making a large deposit in my name at a Swiss bank." *Woody Allen*
8. "If God is male, then the male is God." *Mary Daly*
9. Does Pascal argue for either monotheism or polytheism?

Readings

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