

George Schlesinger addresses several major objections to Pascal's famous wager. Although he doesn't consider either of these the "gravest objection," he first defends the wager against the common aversion to its seemingly mercenary nature and the concern that the wagerer is not achieving the essence of religion. His argument that an appeal to greed is acceptable could be strengthened, and he fails to adequately account for how the bettor acquires genuine belief in God, which, I will argue, is necessary to the essence of religion.

According to Pascal, it is necessary for all people to make a decision between two options: "God is, or He is not." In the famous wager argument, since one is forced to bet one way or the other, it is in one's best interest to bet in favor of God's existence because "if you gain, you gain all. If you lose, you lose nothing" (Pascal III, 233). A common objection, which "has no great logical force but carries considerable psychological weight" (Schlesinger 83), is that the wager seems to be mercenary and even impious. Simply betting on God because one has nothing to lose by it hardly seems the sort of behavior a perfectly good being would endorse. C.S. Lewis, although in reaction to a different proposition, also sums up this particular objection to Pascal's wager. "When I respond to that appeal I seem to myself to be a thousand miles away from Christ. If I am sure of anything I am sure that His teaching was never meant to confirm my congenital preference for safe investments and limited liabilities" (Lewis 120) 3

Schlesinger's response to this distaste is that "we are free to assume that no objective is ever hallowed enough that it should be impermissible to reach it by anything

but impeccable means” (Schlesinger 84). He suggests that even the noblest action, such as donating vast sums of money to charity, could conceivably contain an element of, or even be totally motivated by, greed. The person who takes that approach must admit that every act that fulfills some wish is selfish, which is manifest nonsense; therefore, the pursuit of a quest cannot be called deplorable simply because it is open to the accusation of greed. Furthermore, due to the exalted nature of the reward of belief in God, desiring that kind of pleasure is to be acclaimed. Therefore, even if one is (at least initially) totally motivated by this sort of “greed,” it is actually a noble greed and not offensive.

Schlesinger is correct that we are free to assume that the religious seeker needn't be expected to reach God by impeccable means. Indeed, if the doctrine of the sinfulness of all mankind is correct, that would be impossible. This argument that suspicion of greed in betting on God (because of a selfish wish for acquiring an eternal reward for oneself) necessarily leads to suspicion of every act fulfilling some wish, however, seems to be a slippery slope. At least, it is possible to claim that seeking God for such reasons debases the individual (because they are, in fact, *not* seeking God but rather eternal reward merely for personal benefit), which Schlesinger admits is a reasonable cause for calling a pursuit deplorable. After all, the desire for eternal reward is easily independent of the one who offers it. Samuel Butler jokingly pointed out, “An apology for the Devil: It must be remembered that we have only heard one side of the case. God has written all the books.” If the devil also had his say and theoretically had the power to offer eternal reward in his kingdom to those following his ways, why not bet on him? This, in turn, is a potentially damaging response to the idea that greed for God's reward is noble.

I think a better defense against the feelings of distaste involves a reflection on the nature of the wager. Although it was not published, Pascal is appealing to his (apparently intended) audience solely in terms of their greed. If one grants the assumption that impeccable means aren't compulsory and that there is hope even for people (at least initially) motivated only by greed to reach God, Pascal's is reasonable target. No other type of argument but an appeal to greed could possibly reach them, and Pascal's goal is not outlining the ideal path to religious belief (if such a thing exists) but rather offering the only possible beginning that type of person could take. His wager can be seen as a way to initially reach his audience through a motivation common to virtually all people, one which for some is their exclusive motivation. By showing that the search for God is worthwhile even merely in terms of greed, his audience can conceivably begin that quest solely on that basis. Pascal intends and expects the ensuing search to transform people in such a way that they acquire noble traits and motivations, enabling them to come to believe in God for other reasons as well. They will become *fidèle, honnête, humble, reconnaissant, bienfaisant, ami sincère, véritable*¹ (Pascal III 233). As a result, not only is Pascal's approach acceptable for this purpose but quite possibly the only kind he could have taken.

Betting on God may be "the manifestation of a noble greed that is to be acclaimed" (Schlesinger 85), but is simply putting one's money on God's existence sufficient? This seems to be the unstated objection Schlesinger replies to when he points out that "the essence of true religion is not the intellectual assent to a set of propositions" (Schlesinger 85). "Even the demons believe" (James 2:15); yet clearly their intellectual belief in God does not grant them divine approval. Instead, the essence of religion is

¹ Faithful, honest, humble, grateful, generous, a sincere friend, truthful

“having one’s heart and soul virtually consumed by a deep reverence and love of God” (Schlesinger 85). Many religious thinkers and philosophers have said that such a love comes only from obedience to God’s commands. For this reason, according to Schlesinger, Pascal’s advice to bet on God and generate this state of mind through desirable behavior is not only appropriate but possibly “absolutely indispensable” for achieving the essence of religion.

The problem with this response is that true belief is *more* than intellectual assent, not less. True religion surely involves a love of God, whose development may necessitate fulfillment of religious practices, but love of God or obedience to His commands without belief in God, while crucial, is not sufficient and also seems to be nonsensical. Schlesinger claims that behaving in accordance with religious rules before having acquired actual belief provides “the proper grounds on which fervent love for the Divine may grow.” Love for the divine, however, is not the same as belief in the divine. As a result, through this response Schlesinger does not provide an adequate account of how belief in God is obtained.

Pascal himself claims that the bettor can actually indirectly control his beliefs through such religious behavior, for *çela vous fera croire et vous abêtira*. In other words, Pascal’s mechanism for obtaining belief demands deadening of the faculties that make us human. Schlesinger fails to defend his claim that such an approach could lead to “genuine belief” (Schlesinger 84). In fact, he later goes on to say that belief is obtained through compelling arguments or credible evidence, but does not reconcile this with the notion that the one who wagers on God must deaden his very ability to respond to arguments or evidence.

Schlesinger argues that betting on God cannot be called deplorable simply based on its openness to the accusation of greed; however, one might reply that it can be called wrong because it demands belief based on something other than epistemic reasons. In other words, the person who bets on God does not do so because he thinks that God actually exists, but rather for a perceived benefit to himself, and deadens his reason in order to do so. Perhaps that should not offend religious proprieties, but it should offend intellectual integrity.

But is our intellectual integrity more important than acquiring belief in one's own salvation, consolation, or enjoying the religious life, which, as Pascal claims, is the best kind of life? "I can see no scientific or logical reason not to seek consolation by adjustment of our beliefs—only a moral one, a point of honor" (Weinberg 260). I think the point of honor at stake, however, is a very important one. To believe something without seeking to know whether it is true is not really belief. "I happen to think that the religious conservatives [who believe in what they believe because it is true] are wrong in what they believe, but at least they have not forgotten what it means to really believe something" (Weinberg 257). No matter how attractive Christianity's message of salvation is, no honest man should believe it if he does not think it gives a true account of the nature of the universe. And God, particularly the Christian view of him as omniscient and omnipresent, is not mocked. Indeed, Demosthenes, the Greek orator, wrote that "what we have in us of the image of God is the love of truth and justice." If the noble greed Schlesinger describes manifests itself in the abandonment of this love of truth (through obedience to uninvestigated demands of faith), I think this shows it was not really noble. To fail in seeking truth by deadening the faculties that make us human in

order to believe what we want to be true for our own salvation is simply wrong. And even if it were not wrong, the omniscient God the wagger bets on is unlikely to be deceived by it.

I also think it is unlikely for the bettor himself to be deceived by it. “However we may labour for our own deception, truth, though unwelcome, will sometimes intrude upon the mind” (Samuel Johnson). Unless a person can truly render himself beastlike, they will not be completely immune to genuine arguments and evidence regarding the question of God’s existence. And unless they sincerely grapple with that question, their ‘belief’ is based on a foundation of sand, in danger of destruction from any rain and wind.

Works Cited

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