



Two caricatures, I: Pascal's wager

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Pascal's wager and Leibniz's theory that this is the best of all possible worlds are latecomers in the Faith-and-Reason tradition. They have remained interlopers; they have never been taken as seriously as the older arguments for the existence of God and other themes related to faith and reason.

They have, indeed, aroused a common reaction in the hearts of all right-thinking non-believers: indignation. And the ire of the irreligious in this matter has been exceeded only by the me-tooism of the faithful, as they run for cover at the suggestion that there may be any points of agreement between themselves and Pascal or Leibniz.

Still, indignation is beside the point when it comes to evaluating any argument. Pascal and Leibniz discovered certain chains of reasoning. If they have any logical force, that force is not taken away by the fact that the arguments are inconvenient for someone's moral views. Given the tendency of indignation to shoot first and ask questions later, it is more likely that it will obscure clear thinking about the arguments, by twisting one's perception of what the arguments actually say. That is exactly what has happened.

What Pascal said. You have to choose whether to accept religion. Think of it as a coin toss, where you don't know the outcome. In this case, if you lose – there's no God – you have not lost much. But if you win, there is an infinite payoff. So, you should go to Mass, and pray for faith.¹

Pascal caricatured. Being base and greedy, we want lots of goodies in this life and, if possible, the next. So we are prepared to give up some pleasures now, on the off chance of a lot more later, if our eye to the main chance makes it look worth our while. Since the loot on offer is infinite, even a small chance of raking it in makes it worth a try to grovel to any deity that might do what we want.

The first element in the criticism implied here is the suggestion that a gaming model of religious commitment is disgusting. The first extended criticism of Pascal's Wager said:

I lose patience listening to you treating the highest of all matters, and resting the most important truth in the world, the source of all truths, on an idea so base and so puerile, on a comparison with a game of heads and tails more productive of mirth than persuasion,²

while Voltaire says:

This article seems besides a little indecent and puerile; the idea of gaming, of loss and gain, little suits the gravity of the subject.³

But Pascal had already said – and this is one of his strongest points – ‘you must play’. The decision to take religion seriously or not is unavoidable. It is true that some people avoid rational calculation in other life choices, like the choice of marital partner (or at least, they *claim* not to calculate, though unconscious inference is not unknown). Still, it is not rational, admirable or productive. It is simply an instance of the human tendency to think fuzzily in proportion to the importance of the subject: fine-tuning in share portfolio diversification, pure guesswork on the meaning of life.

Further – and this point will recur – Pascal is not resting the *truth* of divine matters on gambling. The conclusion of his argument is a recommendation merely to a certain sort of *action*, namely, action that will give the claims of religion a higher chance to make themselves felt.

The ‘greedy and unedifying’ criticism often made of Pascal's Wager seem to have as little to recommend it. Surely, *whatever* the goods of this life are, their continuance would also be a good? It is sometimes said that the transitoriness of temporal goods sharpens our *appreciation* of them, but surely it makes no sense to say that it actually contributes to their goodness. The animus behind ‘pie-in-the-sky’ jibes must be attributed to some kind of pre-existing wish to find Pascal's argument invalid. It is an effect, not a cause, of indignation.

The next bad objection to Pascal's argument is that one cannot come to believe anything as a result of wanting to do so. Voltaire says, with his usual smug irrelevance, ‘the interest I have in believing something is no proof of the existence of that thing’.⁴ Now Pascal, the rabid old Jansenist, is the last person who needs to be told that. He does not even believe one could come to believe in God through having *perfect evidence*, let alone through a desire to believe. Faith, he thinks, is a free and undeserved gift of God. According to him, what the Wager motivates is not belief, but action, ‘saying masses and the rest’, which will then dispose the seeker to receive God's grace. To

make this objection is also to miss the element of *reductio ad absurdum* in Pascal's argument. It is directed against those who hold a certain belief, namely, against 'men of the world', who believe that it is not worth while taking the claims of faith seriously. The editors of the Port-Royal edition of the *Pensées*, who knew trouble coming when they saw it, added on his behalf:

This chapter addresses only a certain kind of person. The author claims merely to show that by their own principles and by the pure light of reason they should judge it to their advantage to believe.⁵

A more serious objection to the Wager doubts whether Pascal has correctly identified the space of possible hypotheses, across which to distribute his probabilities. Diderot rightly says, 'an imam could reason just as well this way',⁶ and Flew says, 'the central and fatal weakness of this argument as an argument is that Pascal assumes, and has to assume, that there are only two betting options'.⁷ It seems one could just as well consider the probabilities of truth of merely possible religious, not just actual ones. Could not any would-be prophet whip up a structure of hopes of infinite future rewards and punishments, and barter them for tithes in the present? And perhaps one should consider the probability of such hypotheses as that God punishes especially severely those who hypocritically assume the forms of religion as a cover for greed. An uncommitted sceptic, in particular, is one who will consider a larger than average range of possibilities, including ones that promise punishment for rash belief and/or rewards for intellectual honesty.⁸

True as all that is, the adaptability of the Wager to different spaces of hypotheses is a strength as much as a weakness. When Pascal speaks as if there are only two hypotheses, strict Catholicism and atheism, he is giving a fair picture of the choices actually confronting his interlocutor, the Parisian 'man of the world' of 1660. If someone in the 1990s faces a different range of options, that does not make the Pascalian game-theoretic perspective irrelevant. On the contrary, the richer the choice of options considered reasonable, the more the need for careful calculation. Perhaps we take more seriously than Pascal the idea that if God has all the goodness claimed for him, then 'he's a good fellow, and 'twill all be well', so that belief in any particular religion cannot be necessary for salvation. Or perhaps a kind of lowest-common-denominator of religions attracts us more than any particular faith. Or perhaps, in the chaos of the post-modern global village, there are as many reasonable distributions of opinions as there are people. It doesn't matter. The essential point is that decision theory applies in the first instance to the subjective probabilities of a real agent. Pascal got under the skin of the worldly, by understanding what options were serious ones for them; to that extent, but only to that extent, his argument is *ad hominem* and does not survive

the cultural context of Louis XIV's France. Whatever options are serious ones for us, Pascal's approach applies to them – unless we can attribute zero probability to the sum of all theistic options. And who will go so far as to say that? In the modern context, the result of accepting the Wager would again be action, but a different action to the one Pascal envisages, namely, serious investigation of the claims of religion.

Of course, saying that the relevant probabilities are subjective does not mean that anything goes. Just as, according to Catholic moral theory, one has an absolute obligation to obey one's conscience, but also an obligation to inform that conscience, so one must follow subjective probabilities, but ensure they are informed. Or again, the utilitarian who is required to calculate the probable future utility of his actions needs this probability to be subjective (since that is all that he knows) but informed (so that a self-serving but crazy distribution of probabilities does not serve as an excuse for wrong action).⁹ Once one does have informed subjective probabilities, it is they and only they that ought to form the basis of action. Mere possibilities that one is wrong, or that some theory one has not investigated or heard of is right, do not impel the reasonable person to any action. Otherwise, vat-world and deceitful-demon scepticism would paralyse us.

As often noted, Pascal's Wager is the first serious contribution to decision theory, the study of how to proceed in uncertain situations where one must balance probabilities against risks and rewards.¹⁰ But Pascal has imagined at least in outline not only decision theory itself, but also one of the more subtle aspects of it, namely, how to decide on correct behaviour in case of uncertainty as to how much more information one should acquire. In cases like animal foraging, an animal is faced with a choice of committing to a search for food in some direction, based on current knowledge, or postponing commitment in the hope that gathering further information instead will lead to a better decision.¹¹ There is a trade-off between exploitation and exploration. In cases where the present alternatives have little evidence for them (they lack 'weight of evidence', in Keynes' sense¹²), it is likely that a little further evidence will drastically change the probabilities of the alternatives; if such evidence can be gathered at low cost, it is worthwhile to do so. These considerations apply equally well to intellectual foraging, as modelled in such paradigm cases as computer programs to play chess.¹³ There, the problem is to use some quick-and-dirty heuristics to decide which of the huge number of possible sequences of moves and counter-moves are worth calculating further with, before deciding which move to actually make. It is the same with foraging in the space of world-views. Given the wealth of alternatives, I must decide on the basis of current knowledge not so much which to follow, as which to investigate further. How much evidence

it is worthwhile collecting is itself something that must be judiciously appraised, in the light of the time that might be wasted in blind alleys, the prospects of better success somewhere else, and one's estimated capacity to understand and critically evaluate theories. And the payoffs, if the theory being investigated were to turn out to be true.

The abstract and rationalistic – even hyper-rationalistic – style of the Wager can give rise to the impression that it is somehow out of contact with how people really think about these matters. This is not true. On the contrary. As ministers of religion are always complaining, if the customers in the pews really believed what they were supposed to believe, the Church would get a lot more zeal and money out of them. While there are reasons other than belief for attendance at church (like networking with the respectable and scaring the young away from unsuitable sexual liaisons), surely when the effects of these are subtracted, there is still an element of game theory, or having a bet each way. Nor is it obviously undesirable that such things should be happening. Although a church that consists largely of people who only pretend to believe will not be a strong one, a congregation cannot object to individuals arriving “on the off chance” that they will find the meaning of life there. It is then up to the congregation to show those hopes are not in vain.

Finally, if possibilities of low initial credibility are to be taken seriously, should one perhaps also take action on the basis of the possibility of a malicious God? Surely the credibility of that hypothesis is non-zero; from one point of view, that is what the problem of evil is about. But what action is indicated, on the supposition that God is malicious? One's first reaction is perhaps to sacrifice a goat, in the hope of deflecting God's anger elsewhere, but a moment's reflection shows that one has no reason whatever to suppose that such a God likes goat cinders, or would do something for the benefit of the sacrificers of goats, even if he did. One would certainly be ill-advised, too, to act on the basis of any revelations made by a malicious God as to his preferences, as one has no reason to suppose he is telling the truth. In short, the possibility that God is malicious has no consequences for action. Or rather, one is motivated solely to try to reduce the probability of that hypothesis; that is, to find a solution to the problem of evil. We turn to that task in a subsequent article. It will be argued that Leibniz's Best of All Possible Worlds theory, like Pascal's Wager, has been widely caricatured, that it has merit, and that it is a central part of actual thinking about faith.

Notes

1. Pascal, *Pensées*, no. 418 (in ed. of L. Lafuma, Paris: Editions du Luxembourg, 1951, and trans. of A.J. Krailsheimer, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966, pp. 150–151)/no. 233 (Brunschvicg numbering, as in trans. of W.F. Trotter, Everyman Edition, London: Dent, 1931); introductions to recent discussion in R. Anderson, ‘Recent criticism and defenses of Pascal’s wager’, *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 37 (1995): 45–56; J.L. Golding, ‘Pascal’s wager (a critical examination based on recent discussion in Anglo-American literature)’, *Modern Schoolman* 71 (1994): 115–143; on Pascal’s Jesuit source for the Wager, L. Blanchet, ‘L’attitude religieuse des jésuites et les sources du pari de Pascal’, *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 26 (1919): 477–516, 617–647.
2. Abbé de Villars, *Traité de la délicatesse* (Paris, 1671), pp. 354–355, quoted in L. Thirouin, *Le Hasard et les règles: le modèle du jeu dans la pensée de Pascal* (Paris: Vrin, 1991), pp. 168–169.
3. Voltaire, *Letres philosophiques*, 17th letter, remark V.
4. Ibid.
5. *Pensées* (1670) p. 52, quoted in Thirouin, p. 168.
6. I. Hacking, *The Emergence of Probability* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 66; see J. Jordan, ‘The many-gods objection’, in J. Jordan (ed.), *Gambling on God: Essays on Pascal’s Wager* (Lanhan, MD: Rowman Littlefield, 1993), pp. 101–113.
7. A. Flew, *The Presumption of Atheism* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1976), p. 66.
8. J. Cargile, ‘Pascal’s wager’, *Philosophy* 4 (1966): 1–18.
9. J.J.C. Smart, ‘Utilitarianism and its applications’, in J.P. DeMarco and R.M. Fox (eds.), *New Directions in Ethics* (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986), pp. 24–41, at p. 31.
10. Hacking, ch. 8; F.A. Chimenti, ‘Pascal’s wager: a decision-theoretic approach’, *Mathematics Magazine* 63 (1990): 321–325.
11. Refs in K. Nishimura, ‘Foraging in an uncertain environment: patch exploitation’, *Journal of Theoretical Biology* 156 (1992): 91–111; M.J. Lawes and M.R. Perrin, ‘Risk sensitive foraging behaviour of the round-eared elephant shrew’, *Behavioral Ecology and Sociobiology* 37 (1995): 31–37.
12. J.M. Keynes, *A Treatise on Probability* (London: Macmillan, 1921), ch. 6; see L.J. Cohen, ‘Twelve questions about Keynes’ concept of weight’, *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 37 (1986): 263–278.
13. P. Frey (ed.), *Chess Skill in Man and Machine* (2nd edn., New York: Springer, 1983); I. Bratko, *Prolog Programming for Artificial Intelligence* (2nd edn., Wokingham: Addison-Wesley, 1990), ch. 19.

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