

Thomas S. Hibbs. *Wagering on an Ironic God: Pascal on Faith and Philosophy*. Waco: Baylor University Press, 2017. Pp. xii+204. Cloth, \$44.95

Infini-rien—Krailsheimer §418—is fraught with interpretative difficulties. Reconstruction of the text from the original manuscript is controversial. Interpretation of the reconstructed text is doubly controversial. Location of the text within the wider frame of the *Pensées* is problematic. Interpretation of the text within the wider frame of the *Pensées* is doubly problematic.

The title of the work under review—which also serves as the title for the work’s major chapter—suggests that *Infini-rien* is a central focus. The title of §1 of the major chapter—‘Rereading the Wager’—does nothing to gainsay this suggestion. But the ‘rereading’ that we are given at 145-62 entirely ignores the paragraphs in which Pascal invents decision theory and applies it to the question of whether or not to wager on God. Moreover—and perhaps unsurprisingly—the ‘rereading’ also ignores the secondary literature on the decision-theoretic arguments, including, among others, the key works by Hacking, Duff, Hájek and Bartha. I doubt that I will be alone in thinking that we have been served *Hamlet* without the Prince.

Despite the lack of attention to the decision-theoretic arguments, we are told that Pascal himself ‘eliminates one of the chief objections to the wager, the so-called many claimants objection’ (154). According to Hibbs, the many gods objection fails because Pascal defends a wager on the Christian God rather than a ‘generic wager’ on a ‘generic God’. But the fact that Pascal takes himself to be recommending a wager on the Christian God is irrelevant to the success of the wager argument; those at whom the argument is directed are perfectly well-entitled to ask whether the argument would go through just as well—or just as poorly—in the case of other gods. And, if the argument does go through just as well—or just as poorly—in the case of other gods, then it is hard to see how the argument can do whatever it is that Pascal hoped that it would do.

This book is a paradigmatic example of the use of the macintyre. It consists of five short chapters: (1) ‘Irony, Philosophy and the Christian Faith’; (2) ‘Socratic Immanence: Montaigne’s Recovery of Philosophy as a Way of Life’; (3) ‘The Virtue of Science and the Science of Virtue: Descartes’ Overcoming of Socrates’; (4) ‘The Quest for Wisdom: Pascal and Philosophy’; and (5) ‘Wagering on an Ironic God’. Each of Montaigne, Descartes and Pascal is taken to follow Socrates in supposing that inquiry into the good life is the central concern of philosophy. Montaigne is presented as an advocate of Pyrrhonian peace of mind; Descartes is said to hold that mathematics and science can overcome nature’s resistance to human desire; and Pascal is claimed as a proponent of the view that the cosmos exhibits the presence of a hidden and ironic God. Towards the end, the author asks: ‘How much more rewarding would our discussions be if they were informed by the writings of Montaigne, Descartes and Pascal?’ (191). Some, perhaps; but the positions attributed to Montaigne, Descartes and Pascal are *all* deeply unattractive.

While it is not always easy to tell what is merely being attributed to Pascal and what is also being owned by the author, I think that it is fairly safe to say that the author believes things like the following: ‘the weight of our desires is rooted in an ineradicable and unquenchable desire for the infinite, for a happiness that cannot be lost, and fulfils all our longings’ (131); ‘what typifies our condition is the apparently systematic subversion of higher, properly human capacities by lower, subhuman powers and drives’ (118); something is deeply awry in the human condition; human life has the structure of a quest; the deepest longing of the human heart is the longing for transcendence; the art of dying well is lost to those who seek diversion in order to escape from boredom, anxiety and inconstancy; and so on. Like Pascal, the author supposes that ‘the Christian life’ can properly and adequately satisfy the desire for the infinite, the longing for transcendence, and so on. However, there is much to be said on behalf of the opinion that ‘the Christian life’ is part of the problem rather than part of the solution. It simply isn’t true that *everyone* has an ineradicable and unquenchable desire for the infinite, for a happiness that cannot be lost, and fulfils all our longings. And, for those who do not have this and like desires, there is no itch for ‘the Christian life’ to scratch. Seen from this perspective, Pascal himself is a victim of happenstance; who knows what he might have contributed to mathematics and science had the wider circumstances of his birth been different.

Graham Oppy

Monash University