

Pascal's Wager in Reverse: the Power and Necessity of Liberal Religious Values

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My mother plays the lottery twice a week, and has for years. She buys scratch tickets at the same place each time, and uses the same combination of numbers each time. Maybe she's won a total of a hundred dollars in her life, which doesn't even come close to what she's spent. Most of the time, I manage not to remind her of this.

Today, I want to talk about a much bigger wager: our souls. More than three hundred years ago, Blaise Pascal, a French philosopher, mathematician and theologian, encouraged atheists to gamble on God. I'd like to tell you a little about his claim, because really, it's one hell of a wager. Or one heaven of a wager, depending on what you decide to believe. But then, I'd like to turn his wager around and propose that liberal religion could profit from its own variant of such a wager. Faced with Pascal's exhortation to pony up our souls on the Lord's betting table, I think we can do better, whether or not we individually believe in God. I actually agree with Pascal that we should be concerned enough about our souls to make a wager, and the wager I propose is that our lives and our world are sacred and endangered, and they need our attention now. Waiting for heaven is not good enough.

Pascal's wager is fairly straightforward: it's a better bet to believe in God than not to believe in God, because if God exists and people believe in God, people will receive the infinite gain of eternal life in heaven. If God does not exist and people believe in God, they have neither gained nor lost anything. Pascal did not discuss the equivalent wager of not believing, but it can be summed up this way: if God does not exist and people do not believe in God, they have neither gained nor lost anything. If, however, God does exist and people do not believe in God, they face the infinite loss of eternity in hell. Pascal concludes that the only prudent course of action is to live as if God existed.

Pascal's wager is a very high-stakes proposition, for if he is right, it is our eternal souls that we risk. Moreover, while many of us might say that we choose not to bet either on God's existence or on God's nonexistence, Pascal claims that it is impossible to reject the wager entirely. Does anyone recall the 1979 Bob Dylan song, "You're Gonna Have to Serve Somebody"? Released soon after his conversion, the chorus claims that everyone serves either "the devil or the Lord," as Dylan puts it. More than three hundred years earlier, Pascal asserted that how people live their lives is evidence of how they have chosen to wager. So, we have here a high-stakes, not just life-and-death but life-and-eternity wager, which we cannot help but make. Great, just great.

Perhaps some of you are already coming up with objections to Pascal's logic. What kind of God would want people to believe simply to avoid going to hell? What if there is indeed a God, but that God rewards skepticism and freethinking rather than blind obedience? What if the God worshipped by Pascal and Dylan is not the real God and the real God is a jealous God who will punish people for believing in other Gods? What if, indeed, Pascal's wager is simply a bad use of the human ability to reason? If you had any

of these thoughts, you are not alone; philosophers have been coming up with such objections since Pascal's work was published.

Rather than spending our time this morning debunking Pascal's wager, I would like to audaciously propose a better one. Some people have called it the Atheist's Wager, though I think it could be called the Unitarian Universalist wager. It goes like this: whether or not we believe in God, we should live our lives in such a way as to make the world a better place for our being in it. If there's no God, we have still contributed to improving the world, which goes Pascal one better; remember, he thought people neither gained nor lost anything if there was no God. Clearly, if we work to improve the world, both we and the world have gained something. Ah, but what if there is a God? The Unitarian Universalist wager says that any God worth believing in will recognize in our actions the deepest respect for what is worthy, whether we call it "God" or not, and will at the very least not send us to eternal torture (since any God worth believing in would reject every kind of torture, human or divine).

The Unitarian Universalist wager is certainly an improvement on Pascal, but as presented above it lacks some of Pascal's urgency. It does not seem to be quite so high stakes. I think, though, that the UU wager described above is in fact a matter of urgency once we start examining it, because it comes down to what we hold as sacred.

If you think about the word "sacred," you will notice that the letters can be rearranged to spell "scared." Pascal, in asking us to wager belief in the sacred, invites us to be scared – scared of eternal damnation and to make our wager on that basis. I invite us instead to revisit what we hold sacred: human dignity and the interdependent web of all existence. These are very high-stakes propositions for people of liberal faith. If we think about what the world around us is doing to human dignity and the interdependent web even as we sit here, we might well reasonably be scared – scared for human beings, scared for other beings, scared for our planet.

For Pascal, the only logical outcome of his argument was the decision to bet on God. For people of liberal religious faith, the only logical outcome of our understanding of the sacred is the decision to bet on beliefs that will make a real difference in the world, here and now. Unitarian Universalist religious educator Sophia Lyon Fahs, whose words we heard before, asserted that it matters what we believe. Pascal also thought it mattered what we believed, but only because of where we went after death. I say those stakes are too low. Liberal religion's faith in the holiness, goodness and beauty of life requires us to raise the stakes from our souls to our entire world. We need to reverse Pascal's wager and gamble on values that support the planet we live on now, before death. If our beliefs are walled gardens, we will never venture outside them to understand what is real and true about the world. If our beliefs foster fear, we will never take chances on love, hope or courage. If our beliefs are divisive, we will reject those neighbors who do not share them. If our beliefs are like blinders, we will fail to become the deepest and best selves we can. If our beliefs weaken our sense of worth, we will make self-destructive choices. If our beliefs are dead, our lives will be merely a marking of time until our bodies are as well. If these are our beliefs, we will neither heal nor celebrate the world and ourselves, and the

sacred as we understand it will continue to be assaulted and diminished. Such stakes are too high to either ignore or reject.

The damage that has already been done to human and other souls and to our planet is great, but so too are the possibilities for our future that remain. We may yet build a land where we bind up the broken, release the captives and bring good news to the afflicted and those who mourn. We may yet see the wondrous day when living our principles results in love and justice, peace and freedom, when justice will roll down like waters and peace like an ever-flowing stream. There may yet be such a great day coming, but we will have to be the ones to bring it. I think that getting there means taking up Pascal's wager in reverse. We need to ask ourselves whether what we have chosen to believe really contributes to our ability to heal the world, and facilitates our ability to celebrate our lives in all their complexity. And we need to ask ourselves how well we are living out our beliefs. Pascal's God was happy to step in and take responsibility for saving the convinced believer from hell. From a liberal religious perspective, we have to be the responsible ones. If the sacred light in human eyes has been dimmed, it is our work to reawaken it. If the holy balance of the interdependent web has been unsettled, it is our work to restore it. And it is always our work to play, to find excuses for joy, to celebrate the gifts we do have. We need to sing our thanks and praise as we build the common good and make our own days glad.

It matters what we believe. If our beliefs are expansive, our actions can be generous. If our beliefs warm us like sunshine, our actions can nurture others like a gentle rainfall. If our beliefs bind us to others in celebration and healing our actions can do so as well. If our beliefs are like gateways, our actions can take us through those gateways so that we continue to encounter new worlds throughout our lives. If our beliefs nurture our self-confidence, our actions can apply that self-confidence to rebuilding whatever is broken in ourselves and in our world. If our beliefs are life-giving, our actions can be as well. It matters deeply what we believe and do because our liberal religious souls really are at stake, along with the world that we cherish.

So - may we take up Pascal's wager in reverse, appreciate the stakes and continue our good work in the world. May we always celebrate ourselves as part of the process of building the world we seek. And may we see clearly how our beliefs matter and what they really mean – now, here, while we are still alive. Blessed be.