

Cornel West, Review of Nicholas Rescher, *Pascal's Wager: A Study of Practical Reasoning in Philosophical Theology*, *Theology Today* 43 (2) (July 1986), 302-303.

The immeasurable impact of Pascal is rarely appreciated or understood by contemporary thinkers. On the one hand, Pascal is lauded by literary critics for his writing style while his philosophical contributions are overlooked. On the other hand, Pascal is trivialized by analytic philosophers who view his wager argument as but a poor instance of decision theory. Nicholas Rescher's book is distinctive in that it takes Pascal seriously as a philosopher in light of past and present theological modes of argumentation. As a distinguished historian of pragmatic philosophy, Rescher understands Pascal to be the great innovator of the major philosophical trends of our day: the theological use of practical reason, the diversity of modes of rationality, and the focus on praxis in contemporary hermeneutics.

Rescher's fundamental thesis is that Pascal promotes a basic shift in theological argumentation—a shift from theoretical proof and demonstration of facts concerning God to practical justification of trust and hope (i.e. faith) in God. For Pascal, theological arguments are less like validating scientific data and more like legitimating a practice. As Rescher notes, this shift was guided by the "shrewd psychological insight that despair brings no benefits and hope exacts few penalties." Rescher persuasively shows how Pascal's wager argument presupposes a skepticism regarding the capacity of evidential modes of rationality to arrive at convincing theological conclusions. Yet, this skepticism does not lead to an irrationalism or a crude pitting of reason against blind faith. Rather, Pascal's mitigated skepticism—harkening back to the praxis-oriented thinkers of the Middle Academy and prefiguring the thought of Kant and James—invokes prudential modes of

rationality to motivate decisions regarding theological options for actual human beings. In short, there may be rational grounds to believe in God, yet these grounds are practical ones that may engender faith in a particular God of a specific religious tradition. And over against Jules Lachelier and William James, for Pascal, these grounds have to do with what one will gain in the world to come (eternal life) as opposed to this world (empowerment and sense of dignity).

Rescher's sophisticated treatment of Pascal is significant in that he historicizes Pascal's thought without rendering Pascal a vulgar historicist. That is, he acknowledges that Pascal's apologia for Christianity was not directed at Everyperson to accept a God-in-general, but rather a rational case for nominal Christians of "slack religiosity" seduced by this-worldly interests and concerns to return to the Christian fold. Pascal's project of practical reasoning in theology has a specific audience in mind, namely, the Christian who is acculturated, yet straying into the free-thinking *libertin* of his social circle.

The major problem of Pascal's project—and Rescher's treatment of it— is that it assumes that an evidential mode of reasoning leaves the case of God's existence "up in the air." I do not believe that a persuasive rational case can be made against the existence of God, but given the perennial problem of evil in theology I hold that evidential modes of rationality yield conclusions against the *probability* of God's existence. The seminal thought of Kant and the radical formulations of Kierkegaard, James, and Barth acknowledge that God-talk hits up against the evidential modes of rationality in our culture. In this sense, a rational though practical case for God's existence is more a defense of a particular religious tradition than an attempt to conceive of another mode of rationality. Rescher's rejection of the exorbitant claims of James reveals his own preference for Kant as the

legitimate heir of Pascal's basic shift. And I believe he is right. Yet, this simply shows the degree to which both Pascal and Kant refuse to realize just how non-rational (not irrational) God-talk is in a culture permeated by evidential modes of rationality. To call such non-rational talk a mode of practical reasoning should not conceal just how such talk is against the modern grain.