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Gambling on Faith: A Holistic Examination of Blaise Pascal's Wager

Abstract

Over three centuries after the publication of the *Wager* the sense of shock and dismay that meets Blaise Pascal's unorthodox tool of apologetics is matched only by attempts to reinterpret and reconstruct it or by out of hand dismissal of Pascal's claim to be Christian. This essay attempts to take a close and holistic look at the *Wager* - its premises and claims, as well as some attempts at reinterpretation. Do the reinterpretations stretch the integrity of the model or are they successful endeavors to push out the boundaries? We offer a tentative suggestion for conceptual and statistical extension of the *Wager* on its own terms, remaining faithful to its original construct. Any metaphysically - and epistemologically-consistent system has this worldly implications in the structure of values and ethics it enjoins. To obtain full appreciation of Blaise Pascal's theological and ethical teaching, we comparatively examine Pascal's value structure by studying the similarities and differences that surface between the implied ethics of the *Wager*, a more fully developed explicit value structure derived from Pascal's own *Pensees*, and the ethical dimensions prescribed by a system of Christian-theistic ethics. Not only does this help us to place the *Wager* in a context more faithful to Pascal's entire system of thought, but, in doing so, this method of proceeding may go some distance in mitigating long-standing evangelical angst. The primary criticism of the *Wager* has been that it enjoins faith on purely rationalistic grounds. Therefore we examine Pascal's use of reason in this apologetic tool, we draw some comparisons with the use of reason by the Puritans of his century and we scrutinize the *Wager* - its entire philosophical foundations - through the grid of the presuppositional apologetic pioneered by Cornelius Van Til.

Keywords

Blaise Pascal, Soren Kierkegaard, Robert Merrihew Adams, God, proof, faith and reason, Christian ethics

Disciplines

Christianity

GAMBLING ON FAITH:
A HOLISTIC EXAMINATION OF
BLAISE PASCAL'S *WAGER*

JAN VAN VLIET

I. *Introduction*

Over three centuries after the publication of the *Wager* the sense of shock and dismay that meets Blaise Pascal's unorthodox tool of apologetics is matched only by attempts to reinterpret and reconstruct it or by out of hand dismissal of Pascal's claim to be Christian.¹ This essay attempts to take a close and holistic look at the *Wager*—its premises and claims, as well as some attempts at reinterpretation. Do the reinterpretations stretch the integrity of the model or are they successful endeavors to push out the boundaries? We offer a tentative suggestion for conceptual and statistical extension of the *Wager* on its own terms, remaining faithful to its original construct.

Any metaphysically- and epistemologically-consistent system has this-worldly implications in the structure of values and ethics it enjoins. To obtain full appreciation of Blaise Pascal's theological and ethical teaching, we comparatively examine Pascal's value structure by studying the similarities and differences that surface between the implied ethics of the *Wager*, a more-fully developed explicit value structure derived from Pascal's own *Pensées*, and the ethical dimensions prescribed by a system of Christian-theistic ethics. Not only does this help us to place the *Wager* in a context more faithful to Pascal's entire system of thought, but, in doing so, this method of proceeding may go some distance in mitigating long-standing evangelical angst.

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¹ Most volumes devoted to Pascal's *Wager* contain useful introductions, all with interesting accounts of his life and times. Blaise Pascal was born in Auvergne, France, in 1623, into an upper class family, was home-schooled by his father and demonstrated mathematical brilliance from a very early age. He moved in the rarefied intellectual circles of the day, was converted to the faith (as expressed by Jansenism) in 1646 and had a very powerful spiritual experience—a "second conversion"—in 1654. He engaged in religious controversy and emphasized the virtuous life, dying at age 39 (Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, translated by W. F. Trotter and with an Introduction by T. S. Eliot [London & Toronto: J. M. Dent & Sons, Ltd., 1931], vii-xix).

the Puritans of his century and we scrutinize the *Wager*—its entire philosophical foundations—through the grid of the presuppositional apologetic pioneered by Cornelius Van Til.

II. *Pascal's Wager*

1. *Pascal's Gaming Construct*

Blaise Pascal argues that regardless of evidential considerations for the existence of God, it is eminently reasonable to believe in God. Thus, notwithstanding any ostensible lack of evidence to the contrary, humanity has a self-interest to believe in God based on the exercise of simple cost-benefit analysis which makes use of the fundamental laws of probability. Pascal sets up his gaming exercise in the following way. With respect to the existence of God, there are only two possibilities: God either exists or he does not exist. Let us call these the metaphysical options. Each one of these options can be met with one of two faith conditions, belief or unbelief. In turn, each one of these faith conditions brings upon Pascal's betting partner implications of both a finite and an infinite nature. Based on these implications and the (simple) laws of probability, the subject is well-advised to exercise that particular faith option by which self-interest is best served through the maximization of benefits—i.e., there is every motivation to decide in favor of belief.

What would compel a subject to make the decision to believe? What are the underlying assumptions of this "system" called Pascal's *Wager*? In the first place let us consider the reality of God's existence. Pascal assumes that belief in God has rewards stretching into infinity—all of the biblical promises that comprise eternal and infinite felicity in the presence of God and his people in a redeemed heaven and earth. On the other hand, there are costs associated with belief in God. But these costs are temporal, material and not to be compared to the eternal "rewards" of belief. To believe in God, therefore, and it happens he exists, yields the believer infinite joy but some finite displeasure. Conversely, if the subject refuses to make a faith commitment in the reality of God's existence, earthly, finite gain is experienced, but at the cost of eternal felicity.

Now consider the alternative metaphysical option that God does not exist. Since there are no implications of an infinite nature for believing in God in this instance, then the implications are only finite: belief in God in the absence of his existence will have cost one some earthly pleasures. And the vote against belief with the hypothetical possibility that God does not exist yields the subject some finite gain and no infinite gain or loss.

Pascal argues that the faith choice in the face of these two metaphysical options should be an easy one: to choose for the possibility of God's existence.

Now what harm will befall you in taking this side? You will be faithful, honest, humble, grateful, generous, a sincere friend, truthful. Certainly you will not have those poisonous pleasures, glory and luxury; but will you not have others? I will tell you that you will thereby gain in this life, and that, at each step you take on this road, you will see so great certainty of gain, so much nothingness in what you risk, that you will at last recognise that you have wagered for something certain and infinite, for which you have given nothing.²

We have taken Pascal's *Wager* and presented it in tabular form below in *Figure 1*. The two metaphysical options (columns), each of which calls forth either one faith condition or the other (rows), yields a standard 2 × 2 matrix (two rows, two columns). Each of the metaphysical possibilities has assigned to it an objective probability corresponding to each faith condition. The resulting intersection between the rows and the columns yields the indicated state of affairs for each of all four possible combinations.

Figure 1 The Probability Structure of Blaise Pascal's Wager

<i>Metaphysical Reality</i> <i>Faith Condition</i>	<i>God Exists</i>	<i>Probabilities</i> $0 \leq P(O_i) \leq .25,$ for all i $\sum_{i=1}^4 P(O_i) = 1$	<i>God Doesn't Exist</i>	<i>Probabilities</i> $0 \leq P(O_i) \leq .25,$ for all i $\sum_{i=1}^4 P(O_i) = 1$
<i>Belief</i>	1. infinite gain finite loss	.25	3. finite loss	.25
<i>Unbelief</i>	2. infinite loss finite gain	.25	4. finite gain	.25

When objective probabilities are assigned to all of the possible states of affairs in the *Wager*, each of the four metaphysical-reality/faith-condition combinations carries with it a probability of twenty-five per cent. Thus, $P(O_i) = .25$, for each of the four possible states of affairs, where P indicates

² Pascal, *Pensées*, 233; I am using this translation of *Pensées* because of the handy topical organization performed by Trotter. The history of Pascal's *pensées* (thoughts/reflections)—writing, collection, publication—proves to be a very confusing one. Any introduction to his work will convince the reader of this fact. See for example Pascal's *Pensées*, translated by H. F. Stewart (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, Ltd., 1950), ix-xi. In this present article, my convention in citing from *Pensées* is to quote *pensée* number.

probability, O indicates an option (or "outcome" in the language of probability theory), and i is the generic term for each of the four outcomes and is set from 1 to 4.

Because tautologically the sum total of all probabilities must equal to unity (or 100 per cent), a further constraint is required. Thus, $\sum_{i=1}^4 P(O_i) = 1$; the sum total of all probabilities corresponding to each of the four possible states of affairs or outcomes represented by the four cells comprising the matrix in *Figure 1* must equal unity. Thus, under the column "God Exists," for example, $i = 1$ for the situation obtaining in the case of belief (infinite gain, finite loss) and $i = 2$ represents the infinite loss and finite gain that unbelief earns. $i = 3$ corresponds to the finite loss associated with the "God Doesn't Exist" and "Belief" combination while $i = 4$ —finite gain—is experienced when one doesn't believe in God who doesn't exist.

The cogency of Blaise Pascal's argument hinges on this: there is a one-in-four chance of infinite loss. This possibility is perceived to be too great a gamble for the average rational individual to take. Pascal therefore asserts that "our proposition is of infinite force, when there is the finite to stake in a game where there are equal risks of gain and of loss, and the infinite to gain. This is demonstrable; and if men are capable of any truths, this is one."³ Simply put, a one-in-four chance of infinite gain is too great for the rational creature to pass up. One has a clear, self-interested reason for belief in God, regardless of whether or not God actually exists. This is the argument of the *Wager* in brief.

In his representation of Pascal's *Wager*, Louis P. Pojman discusses the incommensurability of infinite losses and gains with finite losses and gains and dismisses the options pertaining to the situation in which God does not exist (cells 3 and 4 in *Figure 1*) leaving only one metaphysical option with which are associated infinite gains (with "Belief," cell 1) and infinite losses (with "Unbelief," cell 2). But although this model presupposes rationality in the decision-making process, it is not necessarily irrational to choose for finite gain only, because finite gain can be perceived through sensory experience, is immediately accessible and meets the exigencies of humanity's primal (if uncontrolled) instincts. Thus, we will retain these two options as real possible outcomes which leaves us with four legitimate choices. Each one of the options represented by these choices has an equal chance of being exercised and are all mutually exclusive. This is why we have assigned to each possible outcome a probability of .25, or twenty-five per cent. Thus, in the context of the model of Pascal's *Wager* in *Figure 1*, $0 \leq P(O_i) \leq .25$, where $P(O_i)$ represents the probability of each possible outcome, and is constrained to something greater than zero but less than .25. We present it in generic form right from the outset for in so doing we leave open the possibility of adding more possible outcomes to each of the two metaphysical options. In other words, there can be a range of possibilities associated with

³ Ibid.

the faith condition "Unbelief" and the metaphysical reality "God Exists." This could pertain, for example, to a group of individuals (in cell 2) who hold their atheism, in the face of God's existence, with different degrees of strength. The sum total probability for this group of individuals would still be constrained to twenty-five per cent. But now there exists the possibility of options *within* each of the four cells.⁴

We will resist the temptation to challenge the presuppositions upon which Pascal's *Wager* is based, but we will offer some brief commentary. This has to do, specifically, with his characterization of the life of the believer as having finite cost. More precisely, Pascal is assuming, as we see from the quotation earlier, that believers forego "poisonous pleasures of glory and luxury" and have only faithfulness, honesty, humility, gratefulness, generosity, and so forth. But would this be the honest appraisal of the believer who takes a retrospective glance through the corridors of his or her own personal history? It may be that periods of persecution arise in which it is very costly to believe. Yes, there are periods of time when "glory and luxury" evade because of a commitment to biblical principles. But is it so common that we can generalize and construct an entire apologetic model upon this basic presupposition? There are many very happy rich Christians. There are also many unhappy, poor, persecuted atheists.

No doubt Pascal would agree that the life of the believer is characterized by exercise of the four cardinal virtues, adherence to the Ten Commandments and the Golden Rule—in other words, a virtuous life, a life of commitment to God and neighbor. Associated with this, clearly, is avoidance of unvirtuous living, indulgence in, say, the "seven deadly sins." To be sure, understood in this way the life of the believer is one of restraint, of suspension of the thoughts, words and deeds associated with the unredeemed side of human nature which plagues all sinful humanity in an all too evident way. But it is not particularly clear that these are "finite" costs. And even if they can be defined this way, this still does not constitute a sufficiently strong criticism of Pascal's presuppositions to warrant overhaul of his system on that score alone.

2. *Reformulating the Wager*

Attempts at major overhaul of Pascal's *Wager* are legion. Out of a concern related to the one we identified regarding Pascal's assumptions on this-worldly benefits and costs, the French philosopher Jules Lachelier has attempted to reconstruct the model from a somewhat different motive. This motive was driven by a desire to rescue Pascal from the commonplace

⁴ Although this is conceptually difficult to grasp, and even harder to imagine in practice, the theoretical possibility exists. I am establishing this theoretical possibility here to set the context for an attempt at a broader application of this probability structure later in this essay.

criticism of justifying religious belief from pure self-interest. Nicholas Rescher explains the common accusation: "Almost unanimously, commentators denounce the element of crassness that is present in Pascal's *Wager* argument and see it as blasphemous to support religious belief by considerations of prudence."⁵

Pascal's apparent disregard for the benefits of the religious life were of concern to Lachelier. Not only that but, according to the latter, also the "negativities" of a life style devoted to hedonistic pursuit are not adequately represented by contemporary Pascalian models. And so Lachelier attempts to deliver Pascal from what he considers to be the misrepresentations of contemporary interpreters with the result that a "straightforward dominance situation" results where superior benefits are afforded as long as one believes in God, whether or not God exists. We represent Lachelier's reconstruction below as *Figure 2*.

Figure 2 Pascal's Wager according to Jules Lachelier

<i>Metaphysical Reality</i>	<i>God Exists</i>	<i>God Doesn't Exist</i>
<i>Faith Condition</i>		
<i>Belief: life commitment to self-improvement</i>	1. Gain a life worthy of human dignity AND a blissful afterlife in heaven	3. Gain a life worthy of human dignity
<i>Unbelief: life commitment to selfishness</i>	2. Lose a life worthy of human dignity AND a blissful afterlife in heaven	4. Lose a life worthy of human dignity

It is apparent from this major revision that it is not at all true to Pascal. For one thing, the focus has shifted entirely to this-worldly concerns since the decision to believe or not to believe is based on the fruits gained from religious life in this world.⁶ The addition of the phrase "and a blissful afterlife in heaven" really adds nothing to the argument to motivate the decision to believe. Consider the incommensurability argument employed

⁵ Nicholas Rescher, *Pascal's Wager: A Study of Practical Reasoning in Philosophical Theology* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), 117.

⁶ This is a common criticism of Lachelier's renovation of Pascal's *Wager* as Rescher points out in *ibid.*, 117-20.

by Pojman and discussed relative to *Figure 1* above. It was maintained that no matter how enormous the finite gain represented by the respective states-of-affairs depicted there, the mere possibility of infinite benefits reduced the "Pascalian decision" to a choice of one of only two options. And then the choice—between infinite gain and infinite loss—is an easy and a predictable one.

But now Lachelier introduces an entirely different and un-Pascalian incommensurability. The incommensurability arises between cells 1 and 3 on the one hand and cells 2 and 4 on the other in *Figure 2* above. The decision to have faith can be made entirely on the basis of the benefits from this world. In other words, the incommensurability is no longer between decision-making options that return infinite as opposed to finite benefits, but rather between decision-making options both of which return finite benefits. According to Lachelier, the decision for belief is then made, finally, because of the "blissful afterlife in heaven" that he appends to the "worthy and dignified life" accruing to believers. The decision to believe can be made without reference to eternal concerns, strictly on the basis of this-worldly considerations.

It is hard to imagine anything further from the spirit of Pascal's *Wager*. Pascal, the theologian, was concerned to contrast the infinite and eternal against the finite and temporal. He was dedicated to the concept of the superiority of the infinite over any possible benefits arising in this world, in finitude. And he illustrated this through (rudimentary) cost-benefit analysis. The decision, finally, for belief, was motivated by the notion that infinite gain was far better than any finite loss. And the whole system is grounded in the balance of probabilities. This latter concern was that of Pascal the mathematician.

Finally, Lachelier's reconstruction shows a clear victory for a state-of-affairs on the basis of finite gain. He has done away with the need for probability analysis altogether replacing it with, what Rescher calls "a straightforward dominance situation." "The positivity of 'a life worthy of human dignity' would preponderate over the matter of costs, and the need for Pascal's probabilistic, decision-theoretic turn would be averted."⁷ As a consequence, there is no need to assign probabilities to the states of affairs in *Figure 2*.

The major problem with the whole idea of this-worldly benefits is that Pascal's critics, like Lachelier, almost unanimously interpret these to be non-material. But Pascal clearly states in the quote above that he refers to finite loss in terms of "glory and riches" foregone, material wealth lost. To be sure, he seeks to provide some measure of comfort to his poor beleaguered gambling partner who has just been overcome by the sheer force of Pascal's power of reason, but who is still, somehow, unsure. Therefore Pascal assures his gaming participant of the intangible benefits to be derived

⁷ *Ibid.*, 117-18.

from betting on God. But in the balance, the pain of material loss is far greater than the balm of intangible gain and is clearly the issue here. Pascal's demonstrable implicit assumption that, finally, "glory and riches" afford greater worldly gain than do faithfulness, honesty, humility, and so forth, constitute the very heart of the argument. All cogency would evaporate without this predication.

What this means is that Pascal's detractors are guilty of considering him less of a theologian than he is. For knowing the sinfulness of human nature (his *Pensées* discuss this at length) Pascal is, rightly, prepared to concede the battle between living virtuously and continuing in sin to the latter. And such unvirtuous living issues in enhanced "glory and riches." Pascal has an astutely biblical insight into human nature, much more so than all of his detractors. As long as attempts to reconstruct Pascal's *Wager* advance along the lines described above—focusing on the inherently beneficial but intangible advantages of living the life of the believer rather than on the material (dis)benefits as Pascal himself defined them—efforts to revamp Pascal are not only certainly doomed to failure but also, by their disingenuousness, unfaithful to Pascal's own emphases and concern.

We come back one more time to what we consider to be presumptive in Pascal's presuppositions—that he considered finite gain and finite loss exclusively in terms of material things, and that he assumed, *ipso facto*, that faith engendered such finite cost. We mentioned that there are rich, happy Christians and poor, oppressed atheists. But in truth, although this may be an acute theoretical criticism and not one to dismiss out of hand, it is nevertheless not an astute theological one. For it is most assuredly the case that Scripture teaches original sin, that Jesus teaches pain and suffering in this world, that "those who are not for me are against me" and that "all will hate you because of me."

Thus, while the theoretical possibility of our criticism of Pascal's assumptions is a real one, Pascal has the biblical witness and theological reality on his side. Efforts to reinterpret Pascal's *Wager* must be faithful to Pascal the theologian. The history of attempts to remodel the *Wager* and the results of such renovation demonstrate just how dismally this has been true. As well, to be true to Pascal, reconstructed *Wagers* must lend themselves to the same kind of probabilistic analyses. As we have seen this, too, has been compromised. Thus, while we too have been tempted to make efforts at renovation for the theoretical reasons specified above, we have resisted this temptation and take the *Wager* as is. But we will seek presently to extend the boundaries of the *Wager* to give it broader applicability.

3. *Blaise Pascal's System of Ethics*

A study such as this, which seeks to probe particular dimensions of a given belief-system, would be incomplete without examining the implied

value-system. Any metaphysical commitment and epistemological system provides direction to this-worldly existence. Indeed, any system of belief can be judged to be truly consistent and holistic only if great attention is paid to the ethical system to which it subscribes. This holds even absent of afterlife considerations. One does not live, move and have being in a vacuum. A presuppositional system of apologetics, for example, places great weight on the ethical component of knowledge. By comparing Pascal's view of ethics at this point, then, to the presuppositional standard, our argument will clearly serve as a corrective to some of the misdirected ways in which Pascal has been understood throughout the centuries. It should also be noted that Blaise Pascal was himself very much committed to ethical purity. As we shall see presently, his writings are replete with references to morality and the ethical life. Of significance as well is the contemporaneous ethical concerns in the age of the Puritans—these concerns greatly influenced the theological and intellectual arena in which Pascal lived and worked, even if from a geographical distance. The provenance and rise of Protestant ethics, or moral theology, was an inextricable part of post-Reformation philosophical and theological development, most of it in reaction to the hegemony of the moral theology of the Church of Rome. We will now develop somewhat further this mutual concern between Blaise Pascal and the Puritans of his era.

We mentioned that the necessity for a decidedly Protestant moral theology issued in the development of a Puritan casuistry in particular distinction from that of the Roman Catholic Church. The seminal work in this regard of the English Puritan expatriate in the Netherlands, William Ames (1576–1633) built on that great originator of Puritan casuistry, Ames' teacher William Perkins (1548–1602), generally recognized as the father of English Puritanism. Referring to the Puritan custom of borrowing Roman Catholic teaching on case-divinity, Ames opined that “the children of Israel should not need to goe downe to the Philistims (that is, our Students to Popish Authors) to sharpen every man his share, his Mattocke, or his Axe, or his weeding Hooke, as it fell out in the Extreame necessity of Gods people.”⁸

The connection between Blaise Pascal's demonstrated concern for virtuous living and the similar burden of the Puritans is direct. Thomas F. Merrill has observed that the Puritan casuists ignored their contemporary Jesuit casuists in favor of the medieval soul doctors.⁹ This helps explain the dependence of theologians like William Perkins and especially William Ames (clearly against his better judgment) on the Dominican patterns of medieval Catholic casuistry best seen in the moral theology of Thomas. Merrill explains:

⁸ In *Conscience*, “To the Reader,” cited in Keith L. Sprunger, *The Learned Doctor William Ames* [Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1972], 177).

⁹ Thomas F. Merrill, ed., *William Perkins, 1558–1602, English Puritanist* (The Hague: Nieuwkoop, B. De Graaf, 1966), xii.

The brand of casuistry practised by [the Puritans'] Jesuit contemporaries they considered legalistic and prone to encourage moral laxity. The forensic approach of the Jesuits, they felt, stunted the proper development of the conscience by dictating the minimal requirements for the good life rather than inspiring men to strive for the best that was within them. The Jesuit Priest hearing Confession, it was assumed, relied upon minutely detailed rules of conduct which were laboriously related to equally detailed specific cases of conscience. Ultimately, questions of conscience were arbitrated by means of rigid application of precedent and law rather than judgment based upon the exigencies of circumstance. This form of moral scholasticism was abhorred by the Anglican casuists, and they did their utmost to avoid it.¹⁰

The Puritan attitude towards the practical and moral theology of the Jesuits can best be described as disdainful.

Blaise Pascal's conversion in 1646 at the age of twenty-three was to Jansenism, an Augustinian movement named after the Dutch thinker Cornelius Jansen (1585–1638) and devoted to a renewal of piety and devotion, taking deep root in France where it was headquartered. He criticized the moral hypocrisy of the Jesuits who led the charge against Jansenism and he was subsequently accused of heresy by the Sorbonne. The moral theology of the Jesuits thus sustained assault on more than one front—both the Puritans and the French Jansenists declared war on this group. With more than a trace of irony, Pascal muses: “the casuists submit the decision to the corrupt reason, and the choice of decisions to the corrupt will, in order that all that is corrupt in the nature of man may contribute to his conduct.”¹¹

Some of the more instructive and salutary qualities in Pascal's *Pensées* are in the thoughts directed to morality and the unique understanding of human nature demonstrated by these reflections. As such they comprise as much an apologetic tool as the *Wager*. Despite the fragmentary nature of Pascal's *Pensées*, W. F. Trotter has done a masterful job in collecting thematic sections and organizing his translation of the *Pensées* by subject matter. Fully thirty-nine pages of Pascal's *Pensées* are devoted to “morality and doctrine.” Except for the section on “The Misery of Man without God” (thirty-eight pages) this is far and away the longest section in the book. That Pascal attaches such a high priority to these two themes is extremely significant; the remainder of the book's 195 pages are collected under twelve more headings, an average of sixteen pages per theme. “The Necessity of the Wager” runs nineteen pages. Clearly it is to the *Pensées* that we must go in our search for Pascal's system of ethics.

“All men seek happiness” instructs Pascal. “This is without exception. . . . This is the motive of every action of every man.” And that happiness resides in the discovery of that chief good, God, who alone is our “true good.”

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, xii-xiii.

¹¹ Sinclair B. Ferguson, David F. Wright and J. I. Packer, eds., *New Dictionary of Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 63, 492; Pascal, *Pensées*, 906.

In order to make men happy, [true religion] must prove to him that there is a God; that we ought to love Him; that our true happiness is to be in him. Let us therefore examine all the religions of the world, and see if there be any other than the Christian which is sufficient for this purpose.

Shall it be that of the philosophers, who put forward as the chief good, the good which is in ourselves? . . . Have those who have made us equal to the brutes, or the Mahommedans who have offered us earthly pleasures as the chief good even in eternity, produced the remedy for our lusts? . . . What religion will in fact teach us our good, our duties, the weakness which turns us from them, the cause of this weakness, the remedies which can cure it, and the means of obtaining these remedies?

All other religions have not been able to do so. Let us see what the wisdom of God will do.¹²

Having directed humanity to the Christian religion wherein alone can be found the "chief good" it follows then to ask of Pascal: How do we obtain that chief good having identified it? Pascal answers that in this search, "there is open war among men, in which each must take a part, and side either with dogmatism or scepticism. For he who thinks to remain neutral is above all a sceptic. This neutrality is the essence of the sect; he who is not against them is essentially for them."¹³ Only by grace, can humanity be redeemed to be "like unto God, and a partaker in his divinity." And this grace is by faith, for "that man without faith cannot know the true good, nor justice."¹⁴

Pascal makes much of what he calls the two vices: lust (of the flesh and of the eyes) and pride. Most of his musings on morality *per se* are ordered around these two categories. But although Pascal's thoughts on the moral life appear to be more passively oriented to suppression of these vices, he does hold to an active moral life, for "Christians have consecrated the virtues."¹⁵

That the key elements of a biblical ethic are undoubtedly present in Pascal is evident from this small collection of his meditations. That it falls far short of a full-bodied system of Christian-theistic ethical principles is equally obvious. Can Pascal's ethical system, as embryonic as it is, be incorporated into such a system?

Cornelius Van Til maintains a three-dimensional view of Christian-theistic ethics.¹⁶ "It is the triune God of Scripture who sets before man his

¹² Pascal, *Pensées*, 425, 430.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 434; or in Cornelius Van Til's words, "neutrality is negation."

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 425.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 503.

¹⁶ These paragraphs on Christian-theistic ethics summarize Cornelius Van Til's key teachings of Part I in *Christian Theistic Ethics, In Defense of Biblical Christianity*, vol. 3 (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, n.d.).

moral goal, who in his revelation gives him his moral standard, and by the gift of faith enables him to work toward his proper goal by way of following the instruction of his revelation."¹⁷ Van Til has identified a goal, a standard and a source of enablement to reach that standard. The epistemological presupposition determinative of the Christian view of ethics is that the revelation of the self-contained God, the ontological Trinity, is the ultimate reference point in all ethical questions. In other words, good is good because God says it is. Humanity was created, originally, with a perfect moral consciousness (if derivative, having to live by revelation) but by falling into sin that moral consciousness became and now is evil. Augmenting this key presupposition is the metaphysical assumption—that of the complete self-consciousness of God.

The chief good of men and women individually and in society—the *summum bonum*—is the realized program of God for humanity—the kingdom of God. Humanity reaches self-realization and self-actualization in its role as God's vice-regent over the created order. The thrust of the ethical life, then, is to work towards this *summum bonum* (itself a gift of the free grace of God) in obedience to the commands enjoined in Scripture and in the sure hope of future fulfillment. In pursuing such a Christian course of ethics, the work of the evil one is destroyed at the same time, also a key ingredient in the kingdom of God. This means to live in imitation of Christ in pursuit of true righteousness as prescribed in the moral law and reinforced by Christ's teaching. These are the features of the ethical principles taught in Scripture, over against the systems subscribed to and pursued by all those outside the pale of Christianity with whom the believer is in absolute ethical antithesis. In summary, the Christian theistic system of ethics is one in which the kingdom of God, recognized as a gracious gift, is pursued by virtue of the redeemed will in obedience to the standards required by God's moral law. And for this system faith is the motivating power.

To facilitate a brief comparison of the presuppositional and Pascalian systems of ethics under consideration, the table below uses the parameters of the well-defined presuppositional construct developed upon principles given us by Cornelius Van Til. The table compares the presuppositional system of ethics, in terms of these parameters, with two versions of Pascal's value system as these have been inferred from his *Wager* and his *Pensées* respectively. This is not to suggest that there is a discernible internal contradiction in Pascal's own teachings. Rather, while recognizing the distinctive purposes of his more general reflections in his *pensées* as compared to the thrust of the *Wager*, it must at the same time be acknowledged that some kind of identifiable ethical system underlies the invitation to gamble on God.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Preface.

Figure 3 A Comparison of the Presuppositional and Pascalian Systems of Ethics

<i>Parameters of Ethics</i>	<i>The Summum Bonum of Ethics</i>	<i>The Standard of Ethics</i>	<i>The Motivating Power of Ethics</i>
<i>Systems of Ethics</i>			
<i>Presuppositional Christian Ethics</i>	The Kingdom of God	The will of God (moral law - active pursuit)	The renewed will operating by faith
<i>Pascal - Pensées -</i>	The Christian God*	The cardinal virtues (emphasis on suppression of vice)	Faith
<i>Pascal - Wager</i>	Infinite gain (God)	The cardinal virtues	Self-interest motivated by a balance of probabilities

*In fairness to Pascal I must note that he mentions the kingdom of God in the context of virtue, but the precise meaning escapes me: "The true and only virtue, then, is to hate self (for we are hateful on account of lust), and to seek a truly lovable being to love. But as we cannot love what is outside ourselves, we must love a being who is in us, and is not ourselves; and that is true of each and all men. Now, only the Universal Being is such. The kingdom of God is within us; the universal good is within us, is ourselves—and not ourselves" (Pascal, *Pensées*, 485). Although it is possible to read strict orthodoxy into this pensée without being disingenuous, it raises more theological questions than it answers, it seems to me. I thus leave it out of the consideration of my comparative construction of ethical systems. This is a problem with many of the shorter, more uncertain and less coherent thoughts. One can imagine confronting this problem at every turn in organizing the *Pensées* in the fashion Trotter and others have done.

Some clarification is in order on the *Standard of Ethics* (column 3 in Figure 3 above) and on the *Motivating Power of Ethics* (column 4) as we have identified these in Pascal's *Pensées* and the *Wager*.

In the first place, we have set the *Standard of Ethics* as the cardinal virtues, something not explicitly put as such in the *Pensées*. As mentioned above, Pascal remained a son of the Roman Catholic Church despite his Jansenism. Since the days of Thomas Aquinas, and stretching back before him to Socrates, the system of ethical principles used as the guide by which to conduct one's life was represented by the four cardinal virtues of prudence (or practical wisdom), courage, temperance and justice. Even Puritan William

Perkins, the father of Puritan casuistry, constructed his system of case-divinity within a framework in which the cardinal virtues were used as organizing principles. That this would have been Pascal's frame of reference is therefore without doubt.

It can be demonstrated, as well, that Pascal's subscription to the cardinal virtues, if not explicit, are certainly implied in all his teaching. In the *Wager*, perhaps less than in the *Pensées* but there nonetheless, the *summum bonum* is also God as the infinite good. This too was a key doctrine of the Church of the day. By extrapolation, then, from this key doctrine to that of the cardinal virtues we can establish that these virtues, this value structure, constitutes Pascal's *Standard of Ethics* in column 2 of *Figure 3* above.

But that the establishment of the cardinal virtues as the *Standard of Ethics* found in Pascal's *Wager* has equally robust justification may require further clarification. In seeking to convince his gambling partner to bet on the faith, recall Pascal's closing remarks, quoted earlier, reminding the target of his apologetic endeavor that there are, after all, finite benefits to be derived as well as the already established infinite gain: "Now what harm will befall you in taking this side? You will be faithful, honest, humble, grateful, generous, a sincere friend, truthful." Are these not expressions of the cardinal virtues?

Thirdly and finally: Does "faith" appear as the *Motivating Power of Ethics* in the *Pensées*? This again, we must derive by implication for, although the principle of "faith" is inferred in numerous reflections, it is never really made explicit as an organizing ethical principle in the way that is done in the presuppositional system against which Pascal's ethical teaching is compared. In the latter, "faith" is crisply identified as underlying the renewed will by which the *summum bonum* is accomplished. Yet Pascal will say: "It is the heart which experiences God, and not reason. This, then, is faith: God felt by the heart, not by the reason. . . . Faith is a gift of God; do not believe that we said it was a gift of reasoning."¹⁸ From these musings and others it is safe to assume that the primary "reason of the heart," unknown to reason, is faith itself. It is through faith, finally, that admission to the kingdom is granted. And this by grace. It is fair, then, to designate faith as the motivating power in the ethical system, such as it is, in Pascal's *Pensées*.

To summarize, a review of *Figure 3* will substantiate the ethical consciousness of Pascal as being decidedly that of the Christian. It justifies, too, the assertion that to study Pascal's *Wager* in isolation from his *Pensées* is to do him grave injustice, for the man behind the *Wager* is not only a pragmatic rationalist seeking to justify belief in God with the tools of decision theory. But he is also a Christian and the use of reason in this fashion Pascal considered a worthy enterprise, because of its lofty and well-defined goal. For "those to whom God has imparted religion by intuition are very fortunate, and justly convinced. But to those who do not have it, we can give it

¹⁸ Pascal, *Pensées*, 278, 279.

only by reasoning, waiting for God to give them spiritual insight, without which faith is only human, and useless for salvation."¹⁹

To be sure, Pascal held reason in very high esteem as a tool for apologetics. But Pascal's ethical system, considered holistically, is at the very least embryonic of that of the presuppositionalist to which it already bears close resemblance.

4. *The "Analogy" of Søren Kierkegaard*

Before we conclude our focus on the attempts at reconstruction/reinterpretation of the *Wager*, it is necessary to consider one final attempt at interpretation, this time by way of "analogy." Robert Merrihew Adams endeavors to show that the total subjectivity of Søren Kierkegaard can be presented in a way that is analogous to Pascal's *Wager*. "Kierkegaard's views about religious passion suggest a way in which his religious beliefs could be based on objective reasoning—not on reasoning which would show them to be objectively probable, but on reasoning which shows them to be objectively advantageous."²⁰ But just how can this be done?

First, we must briefly review Kierkegaard's views on religious belief. "Christianity lies in decision." Thus, from the point of view of historical truth, Christianity can never be indubitably asserted. One cannot lay any claim to the truth of Christianity on the basis of objective, historical evidence and certitude for the simple reason that these do not exist. "In historical matters," claims Kierkegaard, "the greatest certainty is still only an approximation, and an approximation is too weak for one to build his eternal happiness upon, since its incommensurability with eternal happiness prevents it from obtaining."²¹ Even scriptures—divine revelation—get one "no further than an approximation" because establishing the veracity of the historical reliability necessary to prove its authoritative nature requires a gargantuan effort; the propensity for error is infinite and most sure, sort of like "digging the tunnel under the Thames."²² He concludes his commentary on the objectivity of faith with what he considers to be the heart of the problem of such objectivity and his solution of total subjectivity:

Here is the heart of the matter, and I come back to learned theology. For whose sake is the proof sought? Faith does not need it. Yes, it must regard it as an enemy. . . . When faith falters and begins to lose its passion, when it begins to

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 282.

²⁰ Robert Merrihew Adams, "Kierkegaard's Arguments Against Objective Reasoning in Religion" in Louis P. Pojman, *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology*, 2nd ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 1994), 456.

²¹ Søren Kierkegaard, "Subjectivity is Truth" in Pojman, *Anthology*, 439.

²² *Ibid.*, 440.

cease to be faith, then proof becomes necessary in order to command respect from the side of unbelief. . . .

So when the subject of faith is treated objectively, it becomes impossible for a person to relate himself to the decision of faith with passion, let alone with infinitely concerned passion. . . .

As soon as one takes subjectivity away—and with it subjectivity's passion—and with passion the infinite concern—it becomes impossible to make a decision—either with regard to this probability or any other; for every decision, every genuine decision, is a subjective action. . . . Decisiveness inheres in subjectivity, essentially in passion and maximally in the personal passion that is infinitely concerned about one's eternal happiness.²³

We have quoted Kierkegaard at length to demonstrate his foci. For him the very nature of religious faith renders support of this faith by objective reason both undesirable and misdirected, for doing this betrays patent ignorance of the true nature of faith, faith as subjective decision. Yet there are significant parallel concerns with those of Pascal. Kierkegaard wants to ascertain truth and the decision for faith without *demonstrative* or evidential reason. Pascal also wanted to force the decision for faith without demonstrative reason. But far from being subjective, Pascal relied on the tool of *pragmatic* reason that underlies decision theory. This is Pascal's self-acknowledged *modus operandi*—any number of quotations from his *Pensées* would underscore that priority not the least of which is that well-known and much-quoted "The heart has its reasons which reason does not know."²⁴ Further, Kierkegaard has in view eternal happiness; this too is very central, the determining argument, as it were, in Pascal's *Wager*. To be sure, there are significant perspectival differences of a theological nature, and no doubt Kierkegaard would flinch at Pascal's ostensibly rationalistic "crassness," but is there enough similitude here to allow Adams to make the claim he advances as quoted above: that the objective advantage of Kierkegaard's religious beliefs could be demonstrated by objective reasoning?

Adams' approach is to begin with the state of affairs desired "most of all" by a person "whom Kierkegaard would regard as a genuine Christian believer."²⁵ This state of affairs (*S*) or "outcome" as we have designated it earlier, consists of the truth of Christianity and this individual's relation to Christianity as a "genuine believer" and stirs up such desire within this individual that, on the smallest possible chance of success, all would be sacrificed to obtain it.

²³ *Ibid.*, 441.

²⁴ Pascal, *Pensées*, 277. Trotter, appropriately I think, places this *pensée* in his section on "Of the Means of Belief." It is important to note that with this *pensée* Pascal does not disparage reason. Jan Miel considers this heart/head dichotomy a false one and the most misinterpreted area of Pascal's thought: "The contradictions in interpretation often seem to correspond to contradictions in Pascal's own use of the term [heart]" (Jan Miel, *Pascal and Theology* [Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1969], 157).

²⁵ Adams, "Kierkegaard's Arguments," 456.

This results in the two metaphysical options of Pascal's *Wager* as presented in *Figure 1* above: Christianity is true or it is not true (and Adams claims that Kierkegaard would not object to "so stark a disjunction").²⁶ Thus, one pursues *S* in the hope (based on, quite possibly, an infinitesimally small probability) that Christianity is true. Why? "Just in case one becomes a genuine Christian believer."²⁷ So *S* is pursued in the recognition that chances for a genuine Christian relationship is based upon mere possibility: "one would increase one's chances of becoming a genuine Christian believer by becoming one now (if one can), even if the truth of Christian beliefs is now *objectively* uncertain or improbable."²⁸

Immediately some problems arise with Adams' proposal. First, why is "a person whom Kierkegaard would regard as a genuine Christian believer" even remotely interested in pursuing *S* in the "probabilistic" manner Adams suggests? He or she is already there, presumably, and has no need of a practical, "prudential reason for believing." Having acknowledged this, however, there is something right about what Adams is saying. Perhaps he is underscoring the key problem with Kierkegaard's system: it is nothing more than a singularly existential approach to faith and, finally, demonstrates the object of faith—faith itself. For Kierkegaard, true religious faith is to have faith in faith. In the absence of any further refinement from Adams on Kierkegaard's understanding of what constitutes a "genuine Christian believer" we will proceed on the assumption that a Kierkegaardian believer, because his or her belief is based on the proverbial existential leap, is in need of and will pursue at all costs *S*, and will derive great comfort in his or her search for *S* from what Adams calls "practical, prudential reasons for believing." To conclude, Adams asserts that "Christian belief is therefore *objectively* advantageous for anyone who wants *S* as much as a Kierkegaardian genuine Christian must want it."²⁹

A second problem with Adams' proposal, and a fatal one, is that he changes significantly the value structure under consideration. With the introduction of this change, the analogy Adams claims his model to be is only a very remote one at best. His construction does not lend itself to the sort of system established by the Pascalian *Wager* introduced above. Even Jules Lachelier, for all his faithlessness to Pascal, is closer to the Pascalian mark. For although Adams sets forth two metaphysical options—the truth or non-truth of Christianity—and (only implicitly) two possible faith conditions which give rise to either *S* or *not-S*, the value structures are different. The optimal state of

²⁶ This is a good place to point out that Pascal's *Wager*, in purest form, says nothing about Christianity, as such. It addresses only the question of whether God exists. But in deference to Pascal's personal Christian commitment and his ruminations in *Pensées*, I will assume synonymy of the metaphysical possibility posed by Pascal (God exists/doesn't exist) and that of Kierkegaard-interpreted-by-Adams (Christianity is true/is not true).

²⁷ Adams, "Kierkegaard's Arguments," 457.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

affairs is dual in nature, comprised of desire for the truth of Christianity and personal relationship to Christianity as a genuine believer. But this state of affairs comprised of "desire" and "personal relationship" is not that of Pascal. For Pascal it is much more basic: infinite gain, infinite loss, finite gain and finite loss, period. The reasons are purely and entirely reasons of self-interest alone. There is no discussion on relationship and on desire for truth. The very nature of the *Wager* is to make a probabilistic decision based on truth's absence, a purely logical ratiocination. The reconstruction of Adams as he tries to incorporate Kierkegaard and as he drastically alters the terms of the argument can be considered only faintly analogous to the original.

Finally, the only way that these states of affairs, these ultimate outcomes, O_i in the context of *Figure 1* above, can be analogous to those in Pascal's *Wager* is if, by Christianity, Kierkegaard (and Adams interpreting him) understands what Pascal understands it to be. It does not appear that this is the case, however. From his *Pensées* it is manifest that the Christianity of Pascal is that of the orthodox faith. But it is unclear just what constitutes the Christianity of Søren Kierkegaard.

5. *Pushing Out the Boundaries: A Preliminary Step*

Having established that the problems implicit in Adams' reconstruction of Kierkegaard render it only faintly analogous to Pascal's *Wager*, we now ask whether the issues introduced by Kierkegaard-Adams can be incorporated into the model of the *Wager* and how this might be done. This will be our final task before we go on to our examination of the philosophical underpinnings of the *Wager* and a Christian-theistic examination of these.

The representation of the *Wager* in *Figure 1*, can be used to demonstrate the wager's subsumption of Adams' "analogy" by considering each cell (O_i , for $i = 1$ to 4) as representing an infinite number of possible states of affairs, the total probability of which, for each cell, sums to .25. There is room, therefore, for degrees of difference, or gradations, within each cell. The *Wager's* overall structure remains unchanged—four outcomes, to each of which is attached a probability of twenty-five per cent. But there is room for variation in the detail. What this means is that there is an infinite number of possibilities of states of affairs within each of the four cells in the 2×2 matrix of Pascal's *Wager* such that for each cell the probabilities associated with all the possible states of affairs sum to .25. Thus, $\sum_{j=1}^{\infty} P(O_j) = .25$, where $j =$ any possible state of affairs of the character O_i .

Where to classify Adams' (or any) proposal requires subjective judgment. Because Adams presupposes the truth of Christianity with a greater than zero probability, we place his model in cell 1, in the "God Exists"/"Faith" quadrant of the matrix. Within this cell, and in this particular state of affairs (remember, one of an infinite number), one's degree of faith depends on the ardency of one's desire for that state of affairs, S , which desire is that

"Christianity be true and that he himself be related to it as a genuine believer." How ardent is one in this desire? That depends on the probability one attaches to the possibility of the existence of God, starting from something greater than zero but constrained by the twenty-five per cent total probability allowed for the quadrant. The probability structure within the cell of the matrix (and each of the other cells 2 through 4) determines, shall we say, the "scale of ardency" of desire for *S*.

This particular instance is representative of the underlying probability structure of the "almost Christian," located in the "God Exists"/"I Believe" quadrant, cell 1 of the matrix. And the sum of the probabilities of all *j* in this northwest quadrant is constrained to add to twenty-five per cent.

To summarize, the novel feature of the system here proposed is that it is amenable to an analysis of Pascal's *Wager* within a more detailed system that allows for varying strengths of probabilities within each quadrant. Of course each quadrant and its content are determined by the proposition that God exists or that he doesn't exist. Each of these varying probabilities in each quadrant or cell has associated with it a state of affairs which is pursued with a given degree of ardency. And this ardency is, in turn, determined by the strength an individual assigns to the probability. The sum of the probabilities for all *j* in each quadrant is constrained by twenty-five per cent. Such a system gives rise to a problem of constrained optimization to which can be applied standard statistical techniques for the determination of statistical tests of significance (i.e., statistical validity) for hypothesis testing.

On the basis of these exploratory thrusts into the uncharted territory of Pascal's *Wager*, can Adams' reconstruction of Kierkegaard, an "analogy" to Pascal's *Wager*, be incorporated into a more comprehensive understanding of the *Wager* itself? Can the objectivity of Pascal be reconciled with the extreme subjectivity of Kierkegaard's existentialism? Because we have only tentatively proposed a solution that requires further conceptual and more rigorous statistical examination, we can answer, at this point, with no more than a very careful and cautiously optimistic "yes," but only in an indirect and subservient fashion—both conceptually and statistically—and only when subsumed within Pascal's broader, standard framework.

III. *A Presuppositional Appraisal of the Wager*

1. *The Legitimacy of Reason in the Wager*

It was not so long ago that a Pascalian scholar apologized for offering another book on Blaise Pascal and his thought because of the "intolerable specialization of much recent writing on the subject. Entire works have been devoted to Pascal's family relationships, illnesses, scientific contributions, religious experiences and beliefs, political and social views, or to his predecessors and followers, his models and methods, his prejudices and

failures.”³⁰ And so on. But, according to this author, “books that try to understand the meaning and bearing of Pascal’s whole thought are unfortunately few.”³¹ What this interpreter then decides to do is precisely that. And the clue to Pascal’s thought and around which this scholar commences such a holistic treatise is that of “man in relation to the infinite.” “To [Pascal], infinity and humanity are mysteriously linked and complementary to one another.”³² It will not be lost on the reader that this is the theme with which Pascal chooses to introduce his *Wager*, one in which the argument of whether or not God exists and whether or not to believe are won by recourse to ultimate issues of an infinite nature motivated by the balance of probabilities.

It is not entirely surprising, then, that the totality of theological and philosophical camps of all stripes and persuasions represents fruitful deposit from which a rich ore of opinion on the perceived problems with Pascal’s *Wager* can be quarried. The motherlode, of course, in all of this mining is clearly found in the reaction to the perceived crass pragmatism of Pascal’s justification for religious belief. This theme is commonplace and represents the one vein joining together all opinions on the *Wager*’s intent and method. No matter how detractors choose to present or oppugn Pascal’s thought, his emphasis on the use of reason to bring his partner in the *Wager* to conversion has brought about charges of gross inconsistency. This is because Pascal sets out with the claim that reason cannot determine our choice and he ends convincing his partner that it is most reasonable to wager on God’s existence.

To add to the confusion, the *Pensées* are replete with Pascal’s deliberations on reason, on the heart, on the interrelation between the two and on the functioning of the two in matters of faith and religion. Speaking strongly in favor of faith, and disparagingly of reason in the faith act he says:

It is the heart which experiences God, and not the reason. This, then, is faith: God felt by the heart, not by the reason. . . .

Faith is a gift of God; do not believe that we said it was a gift of reasoning. Other religions do not say this of their faith. They only gave reasoning in order to arrive at it, and yet it does not bring them to it.³³

Even more to the point, Pascal speaks with some cynicism of the contemporary state of religion (primarily of the Church of Rome to which faith he had converted) leaving no doubt as to his own position on the matter:

There are two ways of proving the truths of our religion; one by the power of reason, the other by the authority of him who speaks.

We do not make use of the latter, but of the former. We do not say, “This must be believed, for Scripture, which says it, is divine.” But we say that it must be

³⁰ Roger Hazelton, *Blaise Pascal: The Genius of His Thought* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), 12.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Hazelton, *Pascal*, 13.

³³ Pascal, *Pensées*, 278, 279.

believed for such and such a reason, which are feeble arguments, as reason may be bent to everything.³⁴

With such a view of reason, especially its utility in matters of faith, how can Pascal advance his *Wager* with such singular and explicit force of reason? This question has stumped commentators and scholars alike and this apparent inconsistency has blunted the force of the Pascalian argument. How can we square such rational pragmatism with his views on faith and reason just quoted?

Rescher has probed that question and come up with an answer which successfully deflects the charges of internal inconsistency. In a chapter entitled "The Epistemology of Pragmatic Beliefs," he draws the "critical" distinction between *evidential* reason and *practical* reason:

Two very distinct species of "reason" are at issue in Pascal—the *evidential* that seeks to establish facts (and is in his view entirely inadequate to the demands of apologetics) and the *practical* that seeks to legitimate actions (and can indeed justify us in "betting on God" via the practical step of *accepting* that he exists). The heart too has its *reasons*. Only by blithely ignoring this crucial distinction between evidentially fact-establishing and pragmatically action-validating reason can one press the charge of inconsistency against Pascal.³⁵

Rescher continues his incisive probe into the two "compartments" of epistemology introduced in this quotation: the evidential considerations that ground our beliefs and the rational considerations by which decisions are made in the absence of the evidence requisite for belief-grounding. Rescher emphasizes that it is the exigency of decision-making which forces use of the practical over against the theoretical reason: "the salient difference between 'purely theoretical' and practical contexts is that in the former one can always suspend judgment without penalty, while in the latter we must make up our minds." In the normal course of human existence, in fact, "cognitive/epistemic deliberations" occur, more often than not, in practical settings "and are thus subject to the ground-rules of practical rationality rather than those of theoretical rationality alone."³⁶ Thus, gambling for the faith, betting on God's existence, is the rational thing to do on pragmatic grounds, in the absence of evidential reasons.

This view on the use of reason and epistemological categories is not at all a new development. Firstly, the use of a wager argument was quite common in the seventeenth century to "prove" hypotheses like the existence of God or the immortality of the soul. In fact, Roger Hazelton observes that in Pascal's time nine versions of the wager argument were in currency. And

³⁴ Pascal, *Pensées*, 560. That Pascal is writing in a cynical fashion is apparent from this single reading, this particular *pensée*. But this is not always immediately apparent from each individual *pensée*, read independently. One must read at length in *Pensées* to obtain Pascal's spirit and fully appreciate his display of irony.

³⁵ Rescher, *Pascal's Wager*, 44.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 45-46.

although Pascal has adapted the wager model to his own purposes, "conscious borrowing by Pascal becomes clear."³⁷

Secondly, those familiar with the Puritans—their tradition, their thought, and their precision—will immediately recognize great similarity with Rescher's presentation of Pascal. This use of the theoretical and practical modes of rational judgment is most obvious in the casuistry of the seventeenth century. We mentioned above that while Puritan casuistry had its provenance in the ground-breaking work of Puritan William Perkins, it was his student William Ames who, in his *Cases of Conscience*, constructed the intellectual and theoretical underpinnings for the system of Puritan casuistry that reached well into the eighteenth century.³⁸

It will be useful to review Ames' teaching on the working of the practical and theoretical judgment to validate Rescher's explanation of the interplay of the various epistemic compartments in the exercise of judgment.

What are the dynamics of conscience in action? Following the casuistry of William Perkins before him, Ames explains that conscience results from exercising the intellect, not the will, because it utilizes judgment which belongs to the faculty of reason. But this intellectual exercise is more than just bare assent to facts or "apprehension of the truth;" rather, this judgment presupposes an already "firm and settled" truth. Consequently, it is not a "*contemplative judgement*, whereby truth is simply discerned from falsehood: but a *practical judgement*, by which, that which a man knows is particularly applied to that which is either good or evil to him, to the end that it may be a rule within him to direct his will."³⁹

William Ames designates conscience, "with the best Schoolmen," as act (and not habit or faculty), for it is an act of practical judgment, "proceeding from the Understanding by the power or means of a habit." Further, these acts of judgment operate by discourse through syllogism (as opposed to the dichotomy's other possibility, simple apprehension which would be based on evidential considerations).⁴⁰

³⁷ Roger Hazelton, "Pascal's Wager Argument" in Robert E. Cushman and Egil Grislis, eds., *The Heritage of Christian Thought: Essays in Honor of Robert Lowry Calhoun* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 108-26, 124.

³⁸ William Ames, *Divinity, I & II Peter, Conscience*, front pages missing, n.p., n.d., [1642b] 4.11. Ames' introductory words to the reader are missing from this composite volume. I cite from this volume in book-chapter-section sequence. Within the context of this essay, it is rather interesting that one of the University of Franeker's more famous students during William Ames' tenure there was French philosopher and mathematician René Descartes (1596-1650). Ironically, "while Ames and his fellow theologians were teaching that man walks by faith, Descartes was laying the foundations of modern rationalism" (Sprunger, *Ames*, 80).

³⁹ Ames, *Conscience*, 1.1.2-1.1.3.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.1.6, 1.1.8. Ames' analytical style is Ramist, following the method of French Huguenot philosopher, Peter Ramus (1515-1572). Ramus questioned the authority of Aristotle and greatly influenced the methods and teaching of logic through the seventeenth century. Ramus believed facts could best be understood and explained in a series of successive dichotomies. Although William Perkins freely adopted the Ramist method, William Ames' work is the quintessential example of the degree to which early English Puritanism was prepared to appropriate Ramism wholesale.

Leading the way a generation earlier, Perkins had already suggested that "conscience gives judgement in or by a kind of reasoning or disputing, called a practical syllogism."⁴¹ This syllogistic adjudication is conducted in the court of one's conscience and the three-statement construct is the field of operation of the mind and the memory. It comprises the proposition, the assumption and the conclusion and by deduction makes a judgment.⁴² And for William Ames, Thomas Aquinas was indeed the "best Schoolman."⁴³ It was by means of the syllogism that the Puritans wanted to force decision with respect to the minor (middle) premise, one's personal standing.

To be sure, we must adjust for differences in context and emphases in comparing Pascal with the Puritans. But it is clear that for Pascal's Puritan contemporaries as well, epistemic deliberations consisted of practical (if not necessarily pragmatic) rationality, not just theoretic (contemplative) considerations. Understood in this fashion, Pascal's use of reason (practical) to demonstrate the inability of reason (evidential) is hardly internally inconsistent and in the context of his *Wager* has great merit.

But what are some of the shortcomings of Pascal's *Wager*? And how can a presuppositional Christian-theist address these?

2. Reason's Failure in the Gamble for Faith

It should not be surprising that the most obvious apologetic problem with Pascal's *Wager* is its singular reliance on reason and probability for the

⁴¹ William Perkins, *The Workes of that Famous and Worthy Minister of Christ in the University of Cambridge, Mr. William Perkins*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: University of Cambridge, 1612), 1.535.

⁴² Ames presents the syllogistic workings of the conscience of a sinner in the following fashion to illustrate: "He that lives in sin shall die; I live in sin; I shall die." For Ames, the *proposition* is the *law*, the objective biblical teaching with respect to a particular subject, e.g., "He that lives in sin shall die." The *assumption*, Ames calls an "index," or a "witness," or a "book," i.e., an observation on the state of things relative to the proposition, e.g., "I live in sin." And finally, the *conclusion* is designated the judge, e.g., "I shall die." Ames concludes, *Conscience*, 1.1.8-1.1.10, 1.1.11,

In that Syllogism alone is contained the whole nature of Conscience. The Proposition treats of the Law; the Assumption of the fact or state, and the Conclusion of the relation arising from the fact or state, in regard of that Law; The conclusion either pronounces one guilty, or gives spiritual peace and security."

⁴³ It is important to recognize the Aristotelian system behind Ames' method of syllogism applied to the practical reason. In his discussion on the *Nature of Law* in *Question 90 of Summa Theologiae*, Thomas asserts: "As with outward acts a distinction can be drawn between the doing and the deed, . . . so also with the activities of reason the actual thinking, namely understanding and reasoning, and what is thought out, namely first a definition, next a proposition, and finally a syllogism or argument, can be considered apart. And because the practical reason makes use of a sort of syllogism in settling on a course of action . . . in accordance with the teaching of Aristotle [*Ethics* VII, 3. 1147a24], a proposition can be discerned which is to practice what a premise is to the conclusions the theoretic reason draws" (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae: Law and Political Theory*, ed., Thomas Gilby O.P. vol. 28. Blackfriars Latin text with Introduction, Notes, Appendices and Glossaries, 60 vols. [New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1963-76], 5-7). The Aristotelian provenance of Pascal's practical rationalism is apparent here as well.

generation of its solution—the decision for faith. The God of the *Wager* is but one whose existence is probable, no more. Uprooted from any firm grounding in the self-revelation of God, Pascal's *Wager* becomes an exercise in the application of probability analysis. We have demonstrated above just a little distance of the length to which Pascal's *Wager* can be extended, almost reducing it to an exercise in statistical techniques and probability theory.⁴⁴ We have also shown the legitimacy of Pascal's use of reason in the *Wager* on reason's own ground, for this is the point at which most detractors score a victory. But now we must vote decisively against this system as an apologetic enterprise because of its misdirected orientation. If improperly rooted, its fruit, should it bear any, will be seriously flawed at best. Such must be our judgment of the *Wager* anchored as it is in its non-Christian epistemology. For the only possible apologetic endeavor must begin with the self-revelation of the truly-existing and self-contained God of divine revelation, Scripture. Therein lies its success.

It has been shown that the intellectual and epistemological provenance of Pascal's *Wager* and his use of reason is Thomistic but predates even the "angelic doctor" and has its real roots in Aristotle. Herein lies the fundamental problem of the *Wager* and Pascal's system. For in reference to the investigative techniques employed, the epistemology is decidedly non-Christian. Despite Pascal's conversion he remained a son of the Church of Rome, a church whose epistemology, avers Cornelius Van Til, was informed by "the remnants of paganism in Augustine's thought" which theologians of the Middle Ages raised to "great prominence in the system of the church." "Thomas Aquinas, the great master of Scholasticism, tried to defend the truth of traditional and received church doctrine by employing the Aristotelian methods of reasoning."⁴⁵

To be sure, Pascal's *Pensées*, reflect his concern for sound Christian-theistic faith:

There are three sources of belief: reason, custom, inspiration. The Christian religion, which alone has reason, does not acknowledge as her true children those who believe without inspiration. It is not that she excludes reason and custom. On the contrary, the mind must be opened to proofs, must be confirmed by custom, and offer itself in humbleness to inspirations, which alone can produce a true and saving effect.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ One wonders how far Pascal himself, with his mathematical genius, would be prepared to go in this regard, with early twenty-first-century computer technology at his disposal. In fact, Pascal's innovative seventeenth-century counting machine is considered to be the very forerunner of the computer technology we use today.

⁴⁵ Cornelius Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, In Defense of Biblical Christianity Series, vol. 2 (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2nd ed. n.d.), 56-57.

⁴⁶ Pascal, *Pensées*, 245. In his translation, H. F. Stewart translates "inspiration" as "revelation." His last sentence reads: "but the mind must be habitually open to proof, and must humble itself to bow to revelation, the only true and wholesome influence" (Stewart, *Pascal's Pensées*, 243). I cannot judge with certainty whether Pascal means divine revelation by his use of the word "inspiration" which Stewart translates as "revelation." But I find it puzzling that

It is hard to imagine any true Puritan in the tradition of William Perkins and William Ames finding himself in disagreement with such an assertion. As demonstrated above, it was just such a context that provided the framework for the Puritans' understanding of the dynamics of conscience. But is this really the spirit of Pascal's own *Wager*? Although armed with a fuller understanding of Pascal's thought derived from his *Pensées* it could be argued that he advanced the Scholastic epistemology in a direction more akin to Christian-theistic thinking (forgetting for a moment his emphasis on and initiation of probability theory), it is nonetheless the case that his epistemological categories are decidedly Aristotelian. Blaise Pascal was only half-Puritan.⁴⁷

Despite the obvious differences in approach to the apprehension of knowledge, the influence of René Descartes over Pascal's *Wager* is fundamental. To be sure, Descartes held unswervingly to the necessity of evidential considerations and these apprehended through the epistemic processes of human reason. And Pascal eschewed any such necessity as is evident from the *Wager* itself. Yet even if Pascal's method was signally different from the great skeptic, his motivation was the same. And so Rescher can rightly hold that "Pascal retained Descartes' skeptically-inspired preoccupation with the processes and products of the human intellect."⁴⁸ The *Wager* is testimony to this.⁴⁹ For Descartes, a revision of Anselm's ontological argument would do as proof of God's existence.

It should not surprise us that in the absence of demonstrative (evidential) knowledge, probabilism must necessarily fill the void. In our search for the perfect means to establish the existence of God, we can do away with Descartes and his extreme rationalistic metaphysics and replace him with Pascalian pragmatic rationalism, but still doubt and skepticism motivate the *Wager* and the probabilistic God posed at the beginning of the wager is precisely that which results after the bets are laid. Or we could go to Scripture.

This is what Cornelius Van Til chooses to do in his presuppositional apologetic. True knowledge of God is simply not constructed upon hypotheses. In this connection, Van Til says the following about a *priorism*:

he does say "aux inspirations" in the key last sentence of the quotation, a clearly plural form of the word meaning "inspirations" or "revelations." Is this a reference to scriptural "revelations" or extrabiblical "revelations?"

⁴⁷ While Cornelius Van Til despairs of the non-Christian epistemology underpinning Roman Catholicism, he hastens to add that the epistemology itself is useful, if used in God's service: "It should be carefully noted that our criticism of this procedure does not imply that we hold it wrong for the Christian church to make formal use of the categories of thought discovered by Aristotle or any other thinker" (Van Til, *Christian Epistemology*, 57). Does Pascal's *Wager* reflect such legitimate use of Aristotelian categories?

⁴⁸ Rescher, *Pascal's Wager*, 4.

⁴⁹ That Pascal and Descartes were of kindred spirit as mathematical geniuses should also not be ignored.

Those who seek to prove the existence of God by an a priori argument of the non-Christian sort, prove too much. If they prove the necessary existence of God, they also prove the necessary existence of everything else that exists. The necessary existence of God is said to be implied in the final existence of man. That is taken to mean, in effect, that necessary existence is a correlative to relative existence. But this in turn implies that relative existence is a correlative to necessary existence. Thus God comes into existence by the hypostatization of man. Temporal things together with the evil in them are then taken as correlative to God. This is destructive of God's unchangeability. God, as well as man is in this way made subject to change. Thus we are back at chance as the most fundamental concept in philosophy. A priori reasoning on non-Christian assumptions, no less than a posteriori reasoning upon non-Christian assumptions, leads to the apotheosis of chance and thus to the destruction of predication.⁵⁰

When Van Til speaks of a *priorism* of the "non-Christian sort" this implies his acceptance of an alternative sort of a *priorism*. This is the Christian sort. He is speaking of course about divine revelation in the scriptures. It is here where God reveals himself as the self-contained ontological Trinity. It is here where God speaks in Son and Spirit. It is here where Jesus Christ gives divine self-attestation.

With the presupposition of God's existence you have more than probability, you have absolute necessity. The indispensable character of the presupposition of God's existence is the best possible proof of God's actual existence. If God does not exist, we know nothing. For Descartes' formula, "I think, therefore I am," we now substitute, "God thinks, therefore I am." The actuality of God's existence is the presupposition of the intelligibility of the concepts of possibility and probability."⁵¹

And to this we can add that the probabilistic nature of Pascal's wager is replaced with the certain and necessary character of Jesus Christ's invitation.

In the exercise under consideration here, the non-Christian epistemological methodology is driven to implosion because the causality of God's created order has been reversed. The position of authority must replace that of reason. All facts, all laws—even Blaise Pascal's laws of probability—are brought into existence by the creative force of the self-existent and non-contingent God. This God is not reasoned into existence by the creation of Pascal's laws of probability. To speak of these laws in an attempt to prove the existence of this self-contained eternal Being is to engage in irrationalism of the highest order. Thus, the pragmatic rationalism of Pascal's *Wager* has been reduced to unintelligible irrationalism, because, whereas the notion of God as he appears in the *Wager* is one of only bare possibility

⁵⁰ Cornelius Van Til, *Christian-Theistic Evidences*, In Defense of Biblical Christianity Series, vol. 6 (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1978), 25-26.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 42.

to which is attached an objective probability, the self-existing God of Scripture is absolute actuality, the interpreter of all facts, whom to presuppose vitiates the relevance of hypothetical testing. The universe has God in back of it, not chance.

We have established our major objection to Pascal's House of *Wager* and the philosophical foundations upon which it is constructed. We have also demonstrated that this House will sink in this shifting philosophical sand because not permanently undergirded by the self-contained trinitarian rock, son of that eternal and absolute Master Builder and Creator.

It now remains to show how particular shortcomings of the *Wager* are addressed by the presuppositional system of Christian theism.

A helpful summary of the "limitations of the *Wager* Argument" is presented by Rescher who enumerates six types of individuals who will not be moved by such an appeal, as Pascal himself puts it, "to natural lights." This list includes: the atheist ("who sets the probability of God's existence at zero"); the "all-out hedonist" (one living for the moment alone having no interest in future benefits the probability of which, recall, constitutes the crux of the argument); the "all-trusting disbeliever" (who believes that if God did exist he would be an all-forgiving, benevolent force); the radical skeptic (who "denies not only knowledge but reasonable conviction as well"); the individual who disavows a life based on those "decision-theoretic principles" underlying expected-value calculations; and the member of a rival religion. This raises a legitimate question: To whom, then, is the *Wager* directed?

L'homme moyen sensuel, the ordinary, self-centered "man of the world" preoccupied with his own well-being and his own prudential interests. Pascal does not address the already converted, but the glib worldly cynic—the freethinking *libertin* of his day, the sort of persons who populated the social circle in which Pascal himself moved prior to his conversion. The format of the discussion is that of a dialogue with just such a person. . . .

The aim of Pascal's *Wager* argument is one of apologetics and not of theological theorizing. And, even here, it is a special-purpose instrument with a limited and special mission—to stiffen the backbone of the slack and worldly Christian.⁵²

Rescher concludes by asserting that "all other battles of apologetics" required for the conversion of those enumerated in the list above must be "fought on other fronts with other weapons."⁵³

If such a significant group of individuals finds itself clearly outside the net cast by Pascal's apologetic enterprise, then what possible purpose can it serve? It is hard to imagine such a venerated, ages-old, well-known and oft-repeated apologetic enterprise as being so attenuated in its apologetic applicability to the world at large. But Rescher may well be right. Perhaps

⁵² Rescher, *Pascal's Wager*, 26-27.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 24-25, 27.

for three and a half centuries the *Wager* has been over-rated or misunderstood as an effective tool for bringing individuals into the kingdom on the basis of probabilities and appeals to sheer, prudential self-interest.

The classification of people untouched by the *Wager*, deserves further examination because to address the underlying characteristics of these groups is to develop a comprehensive and therefore successful apologetic approach. An apologetic enterprise needs to be developed that can apprise this first class—the atheist and the “all-out hedonist” (for their presuppositions are the same)—of the absurdity of their position. This absurdity is rooted in the fact that the creature’s fallible, self-referential position constitutes the presupposition of that very atheism to which he or she subscribes, not some appeal to epistemological neutrality. To understand there to be a metaphysical “choice” as to whether or not God exists, and this on the basis of fallible interpretation of perceived brute fact (whether this fact be rationally demonstrable (Descartes) or rationally pragmatic (Pascal), or conceived any other way, for that matter) is not only an intellectual *faux pas* but itself constitutes irrational unbelief of the highest order. How one conducts one’s life here does make a difference, for it indicates one’s metaphysical and epistemological commitment. The hedonist and the atheist are together suppressers of the truth, a truth of which they are aware because of their metaphysical likeness to the Creator in an image-bearing capacity. Somehow the naiveté of the “all-trusting disbeliever” must be exposed for what it is—unbelief and covenant-breaking rebellion. To expect to meet up with such a benevolent God (if as this individual thinks *contra factum* he exists) is a mistake with eternal consequences. It is an arrogant and gravely mistaken presupposition to presume on this God’s neutrality on such conditions as, for example, belief/disbelief and obedience/disobedience. God’s position is amply demonstrated in Scripture by his system of commandments, promises and rewards—the key features of Scripture’s covenantal framework.

The second class of individuals not subject to the *Wager*’s apologetic thrust are radical skeptics and disbelievers in probability analysis. The reason we group together such polar opposites is that they have one thing in common already—lack of confidence in the nature and abilities of the creature. As opposed to the stubbornness and immovability of the atheist, members of this group generally do not need to be disabused of an irrational and unsubstantiated faith in their own metaphysical condition and epistemic capabilities. It remains to lead such individuals to the character and truth claims of the self-contained ontological Trinity. They already doubt. These individuals have already disavowed the premises of the Pascalian gamble.⁵⁴ It remains to convince them of the premises of the biblical surety. Metaphysical, and epistemological skepticism can be met with the biblical

⁵⁴ Rescher states about the *Wager*: “like any other argument, it proceeds from premises and is accordingly impotent to enjoin its conclusion on someone who does not accept them” (Ibid., 24).

view of the universe and knowledge. It is not surprising that Pascal's *Wager* is considered non-effectual in bringing around the skeptic. Could it be otherwise, with an apologetic tool itself rooted in skepticism? A successful defense of the faith must be rooted in the firm foundations of self-authenticating scriptures; only upon this can a sturdy apologetic fort be built which will withstand the onslaught of unbelief, weather the storms of doubt and, within its walls, nurture the first tentative steps to belief.

The final group of people for whom, according to Rescher, the *Wager* fails because not directed at them is adherents of "rival theologies," religions with different truth claims, systems of belief with different ideas about rewards and alternative value structures from those upon which the *Wager* is based. So the search is on for an approach that will bring such individuals to the Christ of scriptures.

Gathering together the characteristics of these unreachable people, then, we can reemphasize that the target group of the *Wager* is those who: are prepared to allow for the non-zero probability of God's existence; are convinced of future benefits and the possibility of advantage of belief; are prepared to yield to practical, interest-oriented reason seeing the failure of theoretical, cognitive reason; are adherents of decision-making theory and prepared to base self-interest in the balance of probabilities; and, finally, have a sense of the God of Christianity and not of rival religions.

This list of potential candidates is a narrow one indeed, and, if accurate, emphasizes the attenuated apologetic thrust of the *Wager*. In the statistical context of the model above we have made an attempt to push out the boundaries of Pascal's *Wager*. Such extension, it is believed, could broaden significantly the scope of apologetic possibilities in the manner indicated, that method based upon the subsumption of degrees of belief or unbelief, constrained by the overall construct of the *Wager* model and its assigned probabilities. But it is important now to recognize just how seriously abbreviated is Pascal's *Wager* according to Rescher's not unreasonable stipulations above.

A presuppositional approach to apologetics which takes as given the self-attesting witness of Jesus Christ—who alone is the way, the truth and the life—is that other weapon Rescher is seeking; the front on which the apologetic battle is fought can only be on the front of divine self-revelation. There is hope for the atheist, the hedonist and the all-trusting disbeliever, despite complete epistemological and spiritual antithesis. There is hope for the skeptic and the non-prudential individual in the certitude of Scripture, in divine interpretation of fact and in the prudence of God's desire for his own. There is hope for the Muslim, the Jew, the Buddhist/Hindu in the reality of the self-attesting Savior-son Jesus Christ of Scripture, who is one with the Father and the Holy Spirit, a self-sufficient triune God. For in distinction from the foreign gods who confuse the one and the many, the believer can speak of the "equal ultimacy of the one and the many or of

unity and diversity in the Godhead.”⁵⁵ This hope rests on the fact that all creatures are made in the image of an autonomous, non-contingent, ontologically-necessary Creator God, and continue to bear traces of this image if significantly altered by sin. On the strength of this metaphysical common ground, these groups of people can be convinced of the truth (written on their hearts) and welcomed into the Kingdom, even if the *Wager* won't do this.

We close this section with a brief conclusion regarding the logical and probabilistic heart of the *Wager* when seen through the prism of Scripture. The assertions of the *Wager* are given coherence by the logical structure of decision-theoretic principles and probability analysis. Logic is the means whereby the fact of these principles are given order and coherence. But this creature-referent interpretation of these facts—and thus the principles—dooms them from the start. Insofar as coherence and meaning arise from this epistemic exercise in logic, it is derived from the divinely-interpreted facts. God has given these facts meaning in a creatively constructive fashion and the *Wager* uses these facts in a receptively reconstructive way. The coherence of the *Wager*, such as it exists, is obtained with the “borrowed capital” of Christian-theism. In point of fact, all creaturely predication is so indebted. Cornelius Van Til puts it this way:

In all three of these fields of endeavor [science, philosophy and theology] man seeks to show that his assertions are both according to logic and according to fact. But when he thinks that his assertions are fully in accord with the law of contradiction and therefore fully clear, they are purely tautological. In that case, science has no contingency, philosophy no synthesis, theology no revelation. His logic hovers above the field of fact, like a turnpike in the sky with no approaches to it. He can go as fast as he wills on this turnpike in either direction; it makes no difference in which direction he goes for going is the same as standing still.⁵⁶

Any intelligibility derived from the *Wager* is with the borrowed capital of Christian epistemology whose metaphysic reflects the biblical view of the relation of humanity to the world and presupposes God from the outset. But the probabilistic God issuing forth from this lottery demonstrates conclusively that ultimately, if Pascal's betting partner chooses to respond to Pascal's invitation to gamble, the bet will be placed in favor of a God whose existence, even at twenty-five per cent probability, is but one floating on a sea of chance; how can such a God offer infinite benefits to Pascal's self-interested gambling partner?

IV. Concluding Observations

It has been demonstrated that Pascal's *Wager*, on its own terms, sustains the attacks that have been made upon it and that its use of reason is eminently

⁵⁵ Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 3rd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1967), 181.

⁵⁶ Cornelius Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969), 320.

reasonable. Reformulations of the *Wager*, however conducted, are bound to fail because the attempted overhauls are constructed upon presuppositions untrue to Pascal's own thought, whether due to misinterpretation (Jules Lachelier and many others) or by design (Robert M. Adams-Søren Kierkegaard). We must remain true to Pascal's own understanding of the reward structure he created and as represented in *Figure 1* above. But we have demonstrated that some concerns raised by attempts at reconstruction can be incorporated in a conceptual and statistically sound way. This extension of the *Wager* we tentatively introduced to initiate further development in a direction which will prove fruitful for those wishing to pursue the study of the *Wager* on its own terms (*Figure 2*).

Taken as Pascal developed it, the *Wager* easily weathers the opprobrium it has incurred on account of its use of reason to close the bet for belief in the existence of God on the basis of sheer self-interest. But as an apologetic tool it fails for this very reason, yielding a God whose existence is, at best, only probable, and thus a God afloat on a sea of chance. The metaphysical and epistemological presuppositions of creaturely autonomy, creature-referent interpretation of brute fact and the ensuing disjunction between this and logic reduce its apparent rationalism to pure irrationalism and ensure failure of the *Wager* in Pascal's apologetic endeavor.

But this should not color our understanding of Blaise Pascal's system of beliefs and ethics as much as we can systematize its fragmentary nature. For Pascal was a convert to a particular orthodox faction within the Church of Rome, a faction whose distinction lay in its commitment to moral purity and biblical orthodoxy, even if not within the framework of a completely refined and finished system. With the use of these emphases, we demonstrated Pascal's like-mindedness with the Puritans of his century who, in addition to esteeming reason highly, had grave concern for the Jesuit dominance in the area of moral theology, and therefore sought to establish a value system which, upon examination, closely approximates the presuppositional system of ethics. The ethical principles espoused by Pascal, drawn from his *Pensées*, and articulated not only in opposition to the Jesuits' system but also as it developed from his own theological reflections, was shown to be of kindred spirit with the presuppositional system developed by Cornelius Van Til, if not altogether precise in the (Reformed) details. This demonstrates that efforts to glean a system of ethics from the *Wager*, as such, are misdirected and underscore the necessity of taking Blaise Pascal in a holistic fashion, resisting the all too common temptation to dismiss him out of hand as simply a prudentially-oriented rationalist, seeking pragmatic justification for religious belief. For Blaise Pascal, was a spiritual kin of the Puritans, a Christian and a brilliant philosopher and mathematician. If we recognize the *Wager* as an apologetic construct with little usefulness in and of itself, but as an imperfect part of his larger endeavor to set out a system of faith and morals, something very important to Blaise Pascal as we have demonstrated, why then should the *Wager* cause us to despair of him?