

The Wager on God by Blaise Pascal: Blaise Pascal's Bet on God

By Ada Prisco *

The third chapter of the Thoughts of Blaise Pascal is presented as a letter that leads us to seek God. The seventeenth century, however, is not yet the ideal space for the freely passionate personal conscience to trace the Spirit wherever it wants to be found. The sensitivity of the philosopher intends first of all to emancipate the religious discourse, to lighten it from the diving suit of terror, which is unjustly placed on it by the most widespread preaching. This leads itself to fueling terror, thus hoping to cause man, small, miserable, and sinner, to take refuge in the faith forcibly induced for a sort of merchandise, which guarantees, in exchange, salvation. Pascal reverses the itinerary and recovers within it the tools of reason and conscience. The search for God appears as a flame lit not by terror, but by what, in comparison, looks like the refined tool of autonomous thought, namely doubt. The certainty of the existence of God is not affirmed either as a dogma or as evidence, it is not a presupposition of reasoning. The presence of God is a hypothesis. It is not irreverent, it does not devalue the value of the research or its purpose. It does not disown the person-God relationship. Rather, he wishes to nourish it from a different perspective, which allows the person to perceive the irreplaceable value of his soul. Following Pascal's discussion on the matter, it is useful to ask ourselves a question that can bring it up to date: why does human life change, based on the hypothesis of whether God exists or not?

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Introduction

The immortality of the soul is something that matters to us so much, and that affects us so deeply, that one must have lost all feeling to be indifferent to knowing what it is about. All our actions and our thoughts must take such different directions, depending on whether we have to hope for eternal goods or not, that it is impossible to take a single step with common sense and judgment, if not regulating it on the vision of this point, which must represent our supreme object. Our first interest and our first duty is therefore to enlighten ourselves on that point on which all our conduct depends. And this is why, among those who are not convinced, I see a very big difference between those who work with all their might to understand, and those who live without worrying about it and without thinking about it¹.

Ours distinguishes people not on the basis of faith, but according to the criterion of doubt that leads to research. The question of the soul is so important in his opinion that not being interested in it is inhuman. Ultimately, however, it is

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¹Blaise Pascal, Thoughts, chap. III, n. 114.

easy to overlook the terms, even by professing any faith in an uncritical way, imposed by fear or submission to an authority that foresees it as an order.

The ordeal can be more authentic even than the goal in front of you: it demonstrates that living in a fully human way never precludes taking on the vitality of the soul as a prerequisite for life as such. The horizon to which Pascal turns his gaze, in fact, does not end in the current world, which is only relatively capable of happiness. To breathe deeply he must know that he can count on eternity.

While dealing with eternity and the soul, the philosopher suggests a method for dealing with unbelief, and an approach for winning unbelievers to conversion. He rejects the acrimony of invectives, blame, the sharp weapons of terror and threats. With a style original for his times, he rejects the possibilities offered by traditional apologetics. He is not interested in stating a thesis, demonstrating its goodness, belittling his opponents, attacking their insufficiency and ignorance. He focuses attention on the truly human substance. Uncertainty is presented as a constitutive condition of the human being. Welcoming it, absorbing it, living with it represent just as many possibilities of taking charge of it. Delegating everything to certainty, whether it comes from a fearful faith or from the total denial of the presence of God in history, are two sides of the same coin, expressions of being immature and presumptuous at the same time. Pascal provokes man to the need to provide for the soul, foreseeing its eternity and thus guaranteeing its happiness. This result can only be experienced by living in the Eternal, which he identifies as God. Giving the soul a chance requires that it be expected to support that God is present and at work continuously in history. The optimal outcome is achieved by those who doubt, search and research, appropriate the faith and live it in the certainty of eternal life in paradise. However, anyone who is committed to research is worthy of consideration and is following a path towards the possibility of full happiness.

Therefore, the soul necessarily matters to anyone who really cares about guaranteeing themselves authentic and lasting happiness. The care of the soul is accompanied by the commitment to research, and, if unavoidable, by living with the precariousness of doubt.

To fully and authentically draw on this experience, however, a leap of the soul is necessary. The starting point is represented by the ability to clearly distinguish happiness from pleasure. Pleasure takes on an ambiguous physiognomy in Pascal, in which the human being ends up becoming passive, losing self-control. In this regard, the comparison that the philosopher establishes between pleasure and pain is illuminating:

It is not shameful to man to yield to pain, and it is shameful to yield to pleasure. This is not because pain comes from without us, while we seek pleasure, for we may seek pain, and yield to it willingly without this kind of baseness. How comes it then that reason finds it glorious in us to yield under the assaults of pain, and shameful to yield under the assaults of pleasure? It is because pain does not tempt and attract us. We ourselves choose it voluntarily, and will that it have dominion over us. We are thus masters of the situation, and so far man yields to himself, but in pleasure man yields

to pleasure. Now only mastery and empire bring glory, and only slavery causes shame².

Happiness, however, is a more stable condition, which the individual achieves by following his own path. It is a path that cannot be traveled in the name of another. It is achieved by accepting as one's own the presupposition of faith, for which the definitive point of reference is not constituted by oneself and what causes pleasure, but by the evangelical indications. In this way one can become happy, even by despising oneself, by pursuing the One in whom everything receives meaning and value, God who became man in Jesus. The pleasure/happiness combination, therefore, is more complex than it seems, it builds one's relationship on the basis of faith, logic and personal adherence. Pleasure has enormous value, as it reflects the depth of faith itself. The complacent human being will never be able to place it in succession, but always as the culmination of his spiritual journey and the foundation of all the other dimensions of life. His reasoning also represents a way in which pleasure, happiness and faith relate to each other in a coherent and harmonious way.

Courage in Nothingness

Pascal's train of thought on the matter is free from any naivety. All human beings want to be happy, so they have no reason, theoretically, to deny its fulfillment by affirming the existence of God and the immortality of the soul. If, however, they are unable to submit to the yoke of imperious and frightening homiletics, they find themselves faced with an alternative that is not at all easy, which involves the comparison with the nothingness that they are, since in fact they know nothing at all about either God or the soul and to the end they cannot reason about it, since

The conduct of God, who disposes everything with sweetness, is to place religion in the intellects through reason, and in the hearts through grace³.

No human faculty contains within itself the ability to combine itself with religion with satisfaction. In fact, reason investigates it with its own means, but the heart also needs its answers. Human beings are thus naturally led to think critically about eternal questions, but they also feel the need to abandon themselves to them with confidence, through emotional involvement. Both dimensions manifest the characteristics of necessity. Each is called to follow a certain path, remaining attentive to the relationship with the other variable, in order to obtain an integral harmonious balance. The difficult journeys faced, even before the destination, put one in close contact with nothingness and regularly remind us of the human insufficiency with respect to the satisfaction of the thirst that he feels and which in

²Blaise Pascal, Thoughts, chap. II, n. 93.

³Blaise Pascal, Thoughts, chap. III, n. 110.

any case he must have the courage not to silence even by quenching it with illusory drinks and by limited effect.

If the human condition is nothing, Pascal recognizes it as the great distinctive feature of the search for God. The soul in fragility turns towards the Eternal, even if there is an almost incomprehensible drama recognizable in indifference. Human beings can also be disinterested in God and not take charge of the search for truth. In this case, we are dealing with a very modern man, even close to the anguished depths of postmodernity, or, even before that, to twentieth-century existentialism.

Pascal, however, evaluates the condition of isolated man with respect to speculative metaphysical themes in a substantially negative framework, as if disconnected from his most authentic and profound instance. He does not foresee that there can be a search for truth detached from the tension towards the divine.

The deciding factor between the two options is indicated over time by Pascalian logic. Human experience takes place in the temporal dimension, it is circumscribed by it. Blaise Pascal sees the fragment as a limit in this. And he points to the great horizon in eternity, into which the human inevitably flows. To fully dedicate oneself to it, it is therefore necessary to focus one's attention not on what is fleeting, but on God. This task is suited to man and is, therefore, right. The opposite attitude is unfair:

... I find it necessary to point out the injustice of men who live in indifference in seeking the truth of something that is so important to them, and which affects them so closely. Of all their deviations, it is undoubtedly this which most proves their folly and blindness, and in this it is easiest to confuse them with the simplest reflections of common sense and with the feelings of nature. Because there can be no doubt that the time of this life lasts only a moment, while the condition of death is eternal, whatever its nature may be; and that, consequently, all our actions and thoughts must take very different paths according to the condition of this eternity; that it is impossible to take a step with common sense and judgment if it is not regulated in relation to this point, which must be our ultimate goal. There is nothing more evident; and therefore, according to the principles of religion, the conduct of men is wholly unreasonable, unless they take another course. Let us therefore judge from here those who live without thinking of this ultimate end of life, who allow themselves to be carried away by their inclinations and their pleasures without second thoughts and without anxiety, and, as if they could annul eternity by diverting their thoughts from it, they only aim to live happily in this moment. However, this eternity exists, and death, which is its beginning and which threatens them at every moment, must infallibly put them shortly into the horrible necessity of being eternally either annihilated or unhappy, without them knowing which of these eternities is prepared for them, forever⁴.

It is curious that the Author encourages us to seek God, not thinking of paradise, of eternal life, but of death, a clear emblem of misery and the total absence of meaning with respect to human life. It is also very interesting that he clearly underlines what, in his opinion, the main purpose of humanity is:

live happily in this moment

⁴Blaise Pascal, *Thoughts*, chap. III, n. 115.

If we think about the current success of the many philosophies of well-being of our times, of the most common applications of Eastern philosophies, of stoicism put to good use in the serenity of the 21st century, of meditation techniques, of the diffusion of mindfulness protocols, all these fruitful schools of wisdom do nothing but facilitate the exercise of concentration of man, of woman, on the present moment, not allowing themselves to be dragged into memory, not projecting themselves into the uncertain not yet, but deepening what is there, here and now.

For Pascal, however, this is the testimony of injustice, the failure to respect the only balance capable of freeing man from the senselessness of nothingness and eternal death.

If even a God is contemplated, therefore, he requires the collaboration of man, who, despite his fragility, weighs thanks to his own intellect and the orientation of the heart. A particular humanism nestles in such a perception. It is not just a question of metaphysics and theology, for the human being it is a question of appropriating in depth a way of relating to one's own finitude, to expand it until reaching the infinite. Therefore, it is possible for him, for her, to overcome death by setting out on the trail of what is not mortal and which leads man himself back to the depths of himself.

The characteristic of human life is identified in death: this retrospectively instills in everything else the sense of an inevitable condemnation, which reduces man to the condition of a prisoner.

Faith as Affirmation

While noting the absurdity of the human being who more or less falsely ignores his own destiny, Pascal makes a digression in the direction of faith. Human beings can accept it or not. He does not welcome her and delivers her to a world of denial:

If I saw nothing that indicated a Divinity, I would resolve to deny; if I saw the signs of a Creator everywhere, I would rest peacefully in faith⁵.

Both options are put in hypothetical form. Faith is associated with peace, while its absence, indirectly explained as an inability to recognize the signs of divinity, is equated with denial. Its presence is therefore an affirmation. The philosopher admits that he finds himself in a dramatic limbo that makes him feel like he is divided in half between the two possibilities. To overcome this distressing uncertainty he invokes God, he essentially chooses a path of trust, which acclaims him as a believer, however tormented by doubts. He only knows how to be a believer in this way. He admits that he observes with envy those who enjoy the gift of faith, but experience it with indifference. Therefore, faith alone is not enough to overcome the miserable dimension that distances the finite being from himself. Pascal would like to be able to believe with certainty, but at the same time he

⁵Blaise Pascal, *Thoughts*, chap. III, n. 131.

desires a faith that is far from habituation. Many times not even sermons communicate as much fervor!

Faith is a powerful remedy in its philosophical reading: it performs a function, it is useful. In itself it has no more value than its opposite. It is a precious instrument, as it emancipates man from nothingness, frees him from eternal death, opening him to God. This, in turn, is destined to reflect the same destiny of faith. Intuited in its essence, it remains suspended in terms of definitions. Pascal's torment is reconciled in the admission that God exists, similarly to how the intellect intuits the infinite, even though it cannot characterize it. Knowing that God exists, tolerating not knowing how. Such a statement excludes or in any case strongly compromises faith understood as a relationship, a dimension so close to postmodern sensitivity. The believer is left with invocation, praise, submission, he is in total subordination.

Aware of the limits, Pascal urges us to accept the possibility of God as a bet, inserting him into future predictions, of which it is impossible to calculate whether they will actually be realized and how. We plan tomorrow's day, but we are not sure whether we have enough life to go through it, nor how it will go in reality, yet we conceive it in our thoughts, we take care of its development. Similarly, it is healthy to welcome God as the same bet. What are the reasons behind this exhortation?

First of all, Pascal underlines the ability to discern the signs of the divine in the universe as an entirely human sensitivity to recognize and interpret differences, escaping the danger of being swallowed up by indifference.

Secondly, this fully valorized hypothesis allows the human being the most important victory regarding his ultimate destiny, which certainly faces death. The believer, beyond any evidence more or less validated by the intellect, does not lower his head in the face of the mockery of nothingness, anguish and definitive defeat. A different horizon imposes itself, which, even before theology, metaphysics, the idea of God, takes care of the entirely human meaning of life and gives it a body for eternity.

In constitutive doubt Pascal chooses to lean in favor of faith and Christian faith, since he recognizes that the advantages of believing far outweigh the disadvantages of incomplete certainty and physiological ignorance.

It is partly an existentialist discourse, partly it seems utilitarian, partly it rushes into mysticism and embraces it decisively.

Conclusion

Returning to the starting question, that is, why a person's life changes, based on the hypothesis of the existence of God, we can conclude with some reflections.

Live as if God exists
Living as if God didn't exist

These are the two possible paths, one excludes the other, each of the two carries fundamental consequences in the present and for the future and cannot be retracted.

Pascal connects every possible positive outcome for human life to the concept of God. He considers his essence necessary with respect to the existence of man. He's not interested in it, though, as a topic in its own right. Instead, he starts from the human being and his desire to be happy. The only way is to get around nothing. Leading an existence that simply ends with death is comparable to the condition of the condemned, already with chains on his feet. The idea of God accepted, even as a bet, internally frees the finite being and therefore hurls him towards what he or she does not know, because he or she cannot have the capacity for it.

In some ways Pascal presents an honest recipe for well-being, in which he does not linger behind logical, ontological proofs, all of which are relatively satisfactory, in the best of cases. Focus on what concerns each one closely. Believing in God responds to anguish, fear, the loss of the meaning of life. It gives you strength, opens you up to what you don't know, exactly like many of the choices and actions that everyone faces over time.

For himself he gives proof of faith, when he mentions the signs to be deciphered, capable of articulating the language of God, his will, his plan. This idea also frees the cosmos from chaos and chance to safeguard it in a superior choice ennobled by finality. It's like running with a goal. There is a path between the start and the finish. Knowing or even just intuiting that the goal exists and that an approach is possible changes the runner's spirit, makes him feel motivated, valued, and sets his pace.

Pascal's God's Wager, criticized from many quarters, including by his contemporaries, emerges today with renewed interest. It does not force mathematical logic, it does not delude itself that the tools of different sciences can be confused and thus be useful. He looks at the result, he takes charge of the indistinct fear that inhabits the human being. And it shows him in himself the redemption from indifference in reading the signs and in the willingness to face the bet as a leap. He invites you to get involved and also to involve yourself in a sort of mantra capable of configuring a different reality:

God exists, I'm fine.

God exists, I make the difference.

God exists, his signs of love surround me.

Transcendental meditation, self-help, positive affirmations for meditating move along a path already traced by much more than utilitarianism, by philosophical genius at the service of everyday life.

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